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# THE POLITICAL FAILURE OF GERMAN LATE ROMANTICISM

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If it is generally granted that the Age of Romanticism coincided with the great wave of political, social, and spiritual liberation which may be said to have lasted from the French Revolution to the idealistic aspirations of 1830 and 1848, then we certainly must admit that the last generation of German romanticists pitifully failed to keep pace with the evolving freedom of man. Instead, these late romanticists represented an inactive, if not downright reactionary, group of authors who, by their meek acceptance of the *status quo* under Metternich, betrayed the legitimate hopes of their people, and the noble visions and goals of Romanticism in general.

This political failure of the poets between 1815 and 1830 becomes all the more evident if we compare their acquiescence to oppression with the militant patriotism of those other romanticists who had just preceded them, the Kleists, Fichtes, Arnolds and Körners who, between 1806 and 1815, between Jena and Waterloo, had fought in the first ranks of German liberation. The political failure after 1815 becomes even more obvious if we compare the late romanticists of Germany with the great romantic authors of the rest of Europe who all, almost with no exception, remained loyal to the great political and revolutionary ideals of the Romantic School and who, therefore, even after 1830 and 1848, stayed on as the great battlers against the Holy Alliance and as the great liberators of, and spokesmen for, their people. Not so the Germans whose will to resist and to fight ceased after 1815—and some twenty years later it then took an entirely different group of poets with a different literary program, the Young Germans—realists rather than romanticists, pamphleteers rather than poets—who picked up the weapons too quickly and too easily discarded by the romanticists, and who then finished the fight against Metternich.

Only England, among all European nations, shared with Germany



a general apathy—not right after 1815, to be sure, but at least some eight or ten years later, after Byron and Shelley, the greatest battles and idealists, had died. But in defence of this attitude we can at least say that England was a relatively progressive and liberal country which did not share in the cruel oppression of human rights such as the Holy Alliance practised it on the continent, and that English literature, therefore, with the coming of the Victorians, could afford to be considerably less militant and less fiercely inspired than it had been before. But everywhere else the fight was on after 1815—a fight begun and continued by the romanticists, and finished by the romanticists (except in Germany) decades and generations later, even after other issues had begun to appear on the scene. In France, Chateaubriand and Lamartine and the ex-Swiss Benjamin Constant became political leaders, with political roles added to their literary significance, right through the midst of the 1830 and the 1848 revolution. Even Musset, not always a plaintive *Weltschmerz*-poet, managed to become militant and to strike back at the Young Germans' *Rheinliebe*—"Sie sollen ihn nicht haben, den freien, deutschen Rhein!"<sup>1</sup>—with a sarcastic and yet martial poem of his own, "Nous l'avons eu, votre Rhin allemand!"<sup>2</sup> But the most indefatigable battler for freedom among the French romanticists was, of course, Victor Hugo, who became the author of *Les Misérables* and whose vitality and fervor carried him away beyond 1848. His main political enemy, the butt of his fiercest attacks, was Napoleon III—and even after 1871 Hugo remained an ever-ready champion of human liberty, to his very last day.

In Italy the sacred gospel of the absolute necessity of freeing the peninsula from foreign domination was so old, so strong, and so ever present, that we can easily see traces of the *Risorgimento* way back in Dante, in Machiavelli, in Alfieri—and, with regard to the romanticists, naturally in Foscolo, Monti, Manzoni, in authors of patriotic historical novels like Grossi and Guerrazzi, in exiled patriots like Mazzini and Gabriele Rossetti, and in martyrs like Silvio Pellico whose account of his incarceration by the Austrians in the notorious Spielberg, *Le mie prigioni*,<sup>3</sup> became a European best-seller in the great continental struggle against the system of Metternich. I think

<sup>1</sup> "They shall not have it, the free German Rhine!"

<sup>2</sup> "We have had it, your German Rhine!"

<sup>3</sup> *My Prison*

it is rather difficult to draw the line and say where Romanticism ended and where the *Risorgimento* began, for both the age of Manzoni and the later age of Carducci surpassed each other in militant fervor and resiliency which again contrasted the volatile and unafraid Italians so greatly from the passively acquiescing Germans and Austrians north of them.

Greater even—to the point of the romantic poet becoming a messiah or a martyr for his oppressed countrymen—was the militant role of the romanticists in Eastern Europe. As two of the most striking examples of this absolute devotion to the cause of freedom I need mention only the Hungarian national poet Petöfi who, in the wake of the revolution of 1848, died on the battlefield defending his country against the Russian allies of Metternich; and the Polish national poet and romanticist, Adam Mickiewicz who, as a people kept in oppression, held up, in his great epic poem *Konrad Wallenrod*, a picture of earlier Polish valor in defeating the Teutonic Knights in the fifteenth century. Mickiewicz died in 1855 while engaged in the important patriotic task of recruiting a legion of Polish volunteers in Western Europe who, through their participation in the Crimean War, might contribute to the defeat of Russia and to the long overdue liberation of Poland.

Indeed, we can safely say that also in the United States at least some of the romantic poets, prose-masters and thinkers participated in the great struggle for human freedom in general and for the abolition of slavery in particular, with Bryant, Thoreau and Lowell foremost among them. Somehow it seemed natural all over the world that Romanticism and the great political and social upheavals in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century should go hand in hand.

Not so in Germany. To be sure, there was militant political poetry in Germany, too—but it was either written before 1815, like Rückert's *Geharnischte Sonette*,<sup>1</sup> or by Young Germans rather than romanticists, after 1840, like Herwegh's *Gedichte eines Lebendigen*.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, one can find compassionate lyrical outbursts for the oppressed and against the oppressors even in the critical period between 1815 and 1830—but such outbursts did not dare to concern themselves with German conditions. It seemed safer to speak of distant and foreign oppressions instead, like Wilhelm Müller's

<sup>1</sup> *Armour clad Sonnets*

<sup>2</sup> *The Poems of a Living Man*

*Lieder der Griechen*<sup>8</sup> and Chamisso's *Lord Byrons letzte Liebe* on behalf of the Greeks in their valiant struggle against the Turks, or like Platen's *Polenlieder*<sup>9</sup> and Julius Mosen's *Die letzte Schlacht vom vierten Regiment*<sup>10</sup> on behalf of the cruelly oppressed Polish victims of Russian brutality. But otherwise the vast bulk of late romantic literature in Germany does not dare to concern itself with the scandalous political situation at home. To be sure, there were protests, incarcerations, banishments among the German authors who dared to speak up; but these men, I repeat it, were not romanticists but were Young Germans or realists: Laube and Reuter who were imprisoned at home, Heine and Börne who went to France, Freiligrath to England, Herwegh to Switzerland. The late romantic writers of Germany, instead, escaped into non-political realms of poetic imagination: Eichendorff and Lenau sang of the beauties of nature as they had rarely been sung before (unless their favorite preoccupation with autumn and dying indicated a slightly subversive subtlety) while E.T.A. Hoffmann (to mention just one more typical late romanticist) with his *Fantasiestücke*<sup>11</sup> and his *Nachtstücke*<sup>12</sup> escaped into the politically equally harmless realm of utter fantasy and grotesque weirdness.

In their enormous influence abroad, great Germans before 1815 had given political and cultural pride and virility to downtrodden nations. Thus Herder's enormous impact upon the racial awakening and awareness of the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe; thus also the amazingly uplifting influence of the two Schlegels upon Italy, Spain and Portugal, when these famous critics, in spite of the past enmity and scorn of classical France, declared Dante, Camoens or Lope de Vega to be every inch as great as, if not much greater than, the much vaunted so-called best authors of classical France. But this same shot in the arm did not last in the case of the Germans—and whatever virility and strength and pride in past cultural greatness they had shown in their fight against Napoleon (Kleist, Fichte, Görres, Arnim, Brentano, the Grimm brothers), it all but seemed to desert them when Metternich's system undid the hoped-for fruits of Waterloo.

<sup>8</sup> *Lays of the Greeks*

<sup>9</sup> *Lord Byron's Last Love*

<sup>10</sup> *Polish Lays*

<sup>11</sup> *The Last Ten of the Fourth Regiment*

<sup>12</sup> *Fantasy Pieces*

<sup>13</sup> *Night Pieces*

Search as I may, I can find only one lone romanticist who, by 1848, felt still young and idealistic enough to participate in the deliberations of the National Assembly in Frankfurt: it was Ludwig Uhland.

In recent decades, as if aware that such an attitude of utter passivity, not to say defeatism, should not be connected with the bold and challenging term Romanticism at all, one has created a new term in order to designate that atmosphere of unheroic living, of small bourgeois contentment, of lack of resilience and rebellion in the face of a tyranny imposed from above: *Biedermeier*.<sup>12</sup> If that term, borrowed from the art of Ludwig Richter and Karl Spitzweg, were to be accepted, we would apply it especially to men like Grillparzer in order to indicate the frustration of life in the very den of the lion, the Vienna of Metternich. Perhaps we could extend the validity of this term *Biedermeier* beyond the two dates set by us, 1815 and 1830, and we might include as an earlier representative Jean Paul, whose *Schulmeisterlein Wuz*<sup>13</sup> and *Quintus Fixlein*<sup>14</sup> were utterly harmless little fellows indeed, dreamers rather than doers, completely unpolitical and unheroic at any rate. And, going beyond 1830, we might include the frustrated and passive life of Mörike; indeed, we might perhaps go up as far as Stifter. Significantly enough, the term *Biedermeier* does not seem to fit in at all with other literatures, which again seems to indicate that this passivity of late German Romanticism is quite unique in Western literature—and one cannot think of a French or Italian *Biedermeier* author, and perhaps only in England could we find similar representatives of repressed life as, for instance, in Jane Austen and the Brontës and the heroines of their novels.

But, no doubt, this utter passivity of the typical *Biedermeier* is particularly strikingly represented by Grillparzer, and I should like to mention three of his dramas to illustrate this point: *Der Bruderzwist in Habsburg*,<sup>15</sup> *Der Traum ein Leben*,<sup>16</sup> and *Ein treuer Diener seines Herrn*.<sup>17</sup> The former two dramas are easily characterized by the deeply symbolical perversion of Schiller's famous line, "Der Übel grösstes ist die Schuld"<sup>18</sup>—for in the late romantic *Biedermeier* Grill-

<sup>12</sup> *Petit bourgeois*

<sup>13</sup> *The Petty School-master Wuz*

<sup>14</sup> *Quintus Fixlein*

<sup>15</sup> *The Brotherly Feud in Habsburg*

<sup>16</sup> *The Dream A Life*

<sup>17</sup> *A Loyal Servant of His Master*

<sup>18</sup> *The greatest of all evils is debt*

parzer this line now significantly reads "Der Übel grösstes ist die Tat": the greatest of all evils is man's positive deed, a deed which may so easily be or become arrogant or criminal or at variance with God's inscrutable will.

In *The Brotherly Feud in Habsburg*, Grillparzer shows us an early seventeenth century emperor, Rudolf II, for whom all action seems blasphemous presumptuousness, because man in his blindness and ignorance time and again is apt to upset the God-ordained delicate equilibrium of the Universe. Persevering, passive persevering and enduring seem to be the only philosophy of life for this Habsburg emperor on the eve of the Thirty Years' War which he tried to avoid through his own complete passivity, just as it was the only philosophy of life for the late romantic poets fearful of Metternich's repressive powers:

Es gebe Lagen, wo ein Schritt voraus  
Und ein Rückwärts gleicherweis verderblich.  
Da hält man sich denn ruhig und erwartet  
Es frei der Weg, den Gott dem Rechten ebnen.<sup>19</sup>

Or again:

Fragt aber du: ob sie mir weiter kund,  
Die hohe Wahrheit aus der Weisen Munde?  
So sag' ich: nein, und aber wieder: nein.  
Ich bin ein schwacher, unbegabter Mann.  
Der Dinge tiefster Kern ist mir verschlossen.  
Doch ward mir Fleiss und noch ein andres: Ehrfurcht  
Für das, dass andre mächtig und ich nicht.<sup>20</sup>

And finally:

Ich bin das Band, das diese Garbe hält,  
Unfruchtbar selbst, doch nötig, weil es bindet.<sup>21</sup>

These are words of utter submissiveness which, if spoken by and true

<sup>19</sup> There are circumstances where one step forward or one step backward are equally ruinous. And there one waits quietly until the path is free which God makes smooth for the just man.

<sup>20</sup> But if you ask me whether this high truth from the mouth of beings has been granted me, I say: no, and again, no. Yet while others may be powerful and not I, industriousness and on top of that reverence have been granted me.

<sup>21</sup> I am the bond which holds this sheaf, itself unfruitful, yet necessary because it binds.

for a ruler, Rudolf II, surely are or should be even more valid for the humble subject who is even more ignorant of the unfathomable will of the stars and of their creator.

And if man feels that he simply must act and rebel, then, Grillparzer teaches us in his *The Dream A Life*, let him at least act and sin and become guilty and punishable only in his dreams, and not in his real waking hours. And so Rustan (sometimes called the Austrian Faust, and sarcastically so, because the German Faust strives and achieves in full reality, while Grillparzer's hero only dreams that he does so<sup>1</sup>) is more than relieved when at the end of his long nightmare he realizes that his ambitious schemes and his concomitant guilt and punishment had not been real, after all, but only a bad dream — and that in real life he was still harmless and innocent:

Breit' es aus mit deinen Strahlen,  
Senk' es tief in jede Brust:  
Eines nur ist Glück hierieden,  
Eins: des Innern stiller Frieden  
Und die schuldbefreite Brust!  
Und die Größe ist gefährlich,  
Und der Ruhm ein leeres Spiel;  
Was er gibt, sind nicht'ge Schatten,  
Was er nimmt, es ist so viel!<sup>22</sup>

In the third and last drama to be mentioned, *A Loyal Servant of His Master*, I am naturally aware of the fact that a very strong and favorable case can be made for Bancbanus, too—a man so utterly loyal to his temporarily absent ruler, King Andreas of Hungary, who had enjoined him to keep strictest order in the realm while he himself was gone, that he did not arrest and punish the villain, the queen's brother, who through his viciousness had driven Bancbanus' own young wife into despair and suicide. Still, in spite of Bancbanus' unquestioning loyalty to his pledged word to preserve the peace of the land, one cannot help looking at him, too, as a depressing example of complete servility, as a man who completely disregards his own personal sufferings and claims to revenge for the sake of a so-called higher cause, the peace within the kingdom. And even

<sup>22</sup> Spread it abroad with your beams, sink it deep in every breast: one thing alone is happiness here below, one thing—quiet inner peace and a breast free of guilt. Greatness is dangerous and fame an empty game; what fame gives are empty shadows and what it takes—that is so much!

when the embittered Hungarians start a rebellion against the queen and her despicable brother, he, Bancbanus, refuses to side with them; instead, he fights them, his own friends, relatives and supporters, for the king alone has the right to punish, and Bancbanus has a blind faith that the king surely will do that after he has returned. And still a worse example of the suppression of his own grievances, when the rebels invade the royal castle, Bancbanus saves not only the queen and the young prince, but also the queen's brother, the fiend who had caused the pathetic death of Bancbanus' wife. One is reminded of the rather notorious Prussian political motto of "Ordnung ist die erste Bürgerpflicht"<sup>23</sup> as he, the prototype of a loyal self-effacing servant, of an utterly submissive subject of the king, exclaims:

Es wird sich weisen, kehrt der König wieder,  
Und das soll bald, gemeldet ward's ihm schon.  
Der nun wird sitzen mit dem Schwert des Rechts,  
Wer rein, wer schuldig, wird sein Wort entscheiden.  
Bis dahin haltet euch als ruh'ge Bürger.<sup>24</sup>

And again:

Ich bin der Nächste, dem man sie geraubt,  
Dem man sein Heil, dem man sein Glück getötet,  
Mein Kind, mein Weib, mein Alles auf der Welt.  
Wenn nun nicht ich, wer ist so kühn und redet?<sup>25</sup>

These, then, are a few amazing examples of the kind of mentality that pervaded the late German romanticists. Why this should be so, why in their spinelessness they differed so greatly from all those other late European romanticists, the Hugos, the Petöfis, the Mickiewicz, who kept on battling until victory was achieved, is hard to tell. I can offer only a few suggestions. One might be that a certain German vice, the lack of civic courage, the inborn unwillingness to

<sup>23</sup> Order is the first civic duty

<sup>24</sup> It will all come clear, once the king returns, and that will be soon, it's already been announced to him. He will now sit with the sword of justice; his word will decide who is pure and who is guilty. Till then behave like peaceful citizens.

<sup>25</sup> I am the one above all whom they have robbed, whose well-being and happiness they have killed—my child, my wife, all I have in the world. If I don't speak, then who is so bold?

oppose the dictates of men in uniform, though prevalent throughout the ages, achieved its worst moments in that period between 1815 and 1830. Or again I might refer to the strange German predilection of calling themselves a nation of Hamlets—at a time when the First Reich was dead and the Second Reich not yet born, and when the hesitant burghers oscillated, not knowing whether they should first strive for imperial reunification in the one extreme, or for true democratic freedom in the other extreme—and, not knowing, they drifted along like Hamlet, dreaming rather than doing. Other reasons for this passivity in the face of Metternich's Holy Alliance were, of course, the two facts that an amazing number of German romanticists were aristocrats by birth, and furthermore an equally amazing number were Catholics in their religious affiliation—which, again, at least in part, explains an ultra-conservative outlook and an evident unwillingness to storm the barricades.

At the end of the long Napoleonic Wars in which Goethe had refused to participate and from which he had proudly held aloof, like an Olympian god, he had been capable of condemning his previous aloofness, of apologizing to his contemporaries, and of vowing that henceforth he would take a real and immediate interest in all political and social problems of his fellow-Germans—and so he had written, in his *Des Epimenides Erwachen*<sup>26</sup> of 1814, the truly great lines of

Doch schäm' ich mich der Ruhestunden,  
Mit Euch zu leiden war Gewinn,  
Denn für den Schmerz, den Ihr empfunden,  
Seid Ihr auch grösser als ich bin.<sup>27</sup>

But, alas, around 1830, we look in vain for a similar confession of guilt, a similar admission of blindness and indifference, from the late romantic poets of Germany as they watched their fellow-countrymen, the students, the burghers, the Young Germans, rise up against oppression. They could not do what, perhaps, they were not meant to do.

<sup>26</sup> *The Awakening of Epimenides*

<sup>27</sup> But I am ashamed of the hours of rest, to suffer with you was gain for me for thanks to the grief which you have felt you are so much the greater than I



# THE NECESSITY OF POETRY

SUDHINDRANATH DATTA

POETRY needs no defence. For it is after all one of the elder arts—perhaps junior only to music and dancing and painting; and I am too much of a Pragmatist to believe that a thing continued to be revered, to give satisfaction for thousands of years, unless it was necessary, unless it served man's persistent needs. Indeed, the unsophisticated have remained ever faithful to poetry; and while primitives all over the world go on using it whenever they are in a state of heightened emotion, it is the perennial storehouse of rustic wisdom and folklore.

I recall also that almost every religion has used poetry as its first medium of expression; and all myths, symbolizing as they do the collective cravings of the human race, its dreams and desires, its ideals and aspirations, have rooted themselves in poetry. No wonder Jehovah, the hectoring God of the Hebrews, always spoke the most magnificent poetry; and Jewish prophets were supreme poets who never let the "chosen" people forget their identity or mission.

The Hindus were even more specific: in the Upanishads, poet is an appellation of God himself; and He revealed His ways to the Rishis who composed the Vedic hymns. Because their successors had a share in the divine inheritance, they claimed the Deity's name for themselves; and as persons enjoying the confidence of Providence they were precluded from the tragic view of life. Indian rhetoricians were therefore justified in describing poetry as a means to God's grace; and the rules of composition they formulated were presumably borrowed from pre-established harmony.

The Greeks never went so far; but they too insisted on the cathartic function of tragedy; and apart from the religious background of their drama and the devotional preparation that preceded its performance, the spectator left the theatre purged by horror and ready to accept his destiny. What is strange about this theory is that it originated in Aristotle, the sturdiest champion of common sense; and from lesser poets he demanded imitation of nature. Thus destiny and nature combined to form Aquinas' necessary God; and the Divine Comedy is His eternal temple.

We are, however, no longer at the end of the Dark Ages; and the necessity of poetry cannot now be established by pointing to the rediscovery of Aristotle by St. Thomas and his disciple Dante's reinterpretation of the Aristotelian tradition. For we are said to be living in an irreligious epoch; and though the contemporary conflicts between ideological dogmas should lead to the opposite conclusion, few of us are prepared to admit how right Voltaire was when he maintained that if God does not exist, it would be desirable to invent Him.

Moreover, the claim that God or His less innocuous equivalent, ultimate reality, is manifest, or at least implicit, in poetry cannot be considered until the contrary view of Plato has been better refuted than Aristotle or his heirs succeeded in doing; and even if Plato's irony is plain in his warning that poets must not infringe on the politicians' privilege of lying, he was unambiguously categorical in stating that, after being anointed with myrrh and crowned with a garland of wool, the poet must be driven out of the city.

It is, nevertheless, remarkable that those who in recent times have defended poetry have discarded the plea of imitation and adopted the Platonic dictum that virtue is knowledge; and since the Idea of the Good is discoverable only through self-conscious introspection, a romantic rebel like Shelley could not but be a fearless fighter for social justice. Thus in the very age when even the charitable began to look upon poetry as the most futile of occupations, Byron threw his life away for the liberation of Greece, the birthplace of classicism; and D'Annunzio, his equal in flamboyance, was his superior as a poet and organizer.

Of course, neither singly, nor in combination, are nobility of mind and practical sense virtues possessed only by poets; and if poetry has to be justified, its claims must be based on really exclusive qualities. Here again Plato may be of help to us; and this will not seem paradoxical to those who remember that he wrote not only the Republic but also Phaedrus. No doubt in the latter work, as well as in Ion, he connects the Muse with "passion, mania and madness, childlike play and unconsciousness"; and in Apology he asserts that "poets speak much and say fine things, but understand nothing of what they say." Consequently Jacques Maritain has sought to equate the divine madness of Phaedrus with the Illuminating Intellect, which, to quote him, is the "non-rational activity of reason that illuminates

with its spiritual light the images from which our concepts are drawn. And this very process of illumination is unknown to us, it takes place in the unconscious; and often these very images, without which there is no thought, remain also unconscious or scarcely perceived . . . "

A better description of the poetic inspiration, as conceived by the Romantics, would be difficult to find; and in condemning their strange images, "Shocking and moving" at the same time, the first French critics of the "wild genius, so dangerous to Art", showed that they had in fact forgotten that only the poetic mind, whatever its norm, can intuit associations where reason faces a void. For similes end as figures of speech because they start with the magic of preconscious comparison; and logical confusion is the least interesting aspect of a mixed metaphor like taking arms against a sea of troubles.

There are, besides, other parallels that words cannot point; and such juxtaposition may be the source of rhyme and rhythm, of metrical pattern and stanzaic form. Inevitably, therefore, the act of composition, at least in its immediate sequence, releases the poet from tension; and should it be this harmony that, when communicated to the reader, prompts him to suspend disbelief, it must be termed pre-established. In other words, poetry forces us to recognize the collective unconscious where our egos lose their stultifying loneliness; and while the resultant revelation might in time degenerate into escapism, it could equally well promote socially beneficial sublimation.

In any case, will, and not wish, was the guiding principle of the world which Mallarmé proposed as an alternative to a society dominated by the politics of power; and it is because Yeats had allowed the fascination of what's difficult to dry the sap out of his vein that he did not flinch when in 1916 a terrible beauty was born. So let us not laugh at the pretensions of poets; let us rather say that, since they too are creators in their small way, they alone can lead us out of the dichotomy between God's will and His reason; and though by following them today, we shall not reach the best of all possible worlds which Leibnitz derived from the said opposition, nor be able to say with Dante, "In Thy will is our peace", yet we shall not have journeyed in vain if on return we can see why the Word preceded everything else.

Those who acknowledge that bathos is the secret of the universe will not be shocked when I summarize the case for poetry by saying

that its study teaches us to distinguish between the use and abuse of language; and the anti-climax may seem less offensive to others if they remember that there is now a whole school of acute logicians who hold that most problems of metaphysics can be solved by Semantics. At all events, it is not inconceivable that, once words are seen to be repositories of analysable meanings, the protagonists of political democracy and the knights of economic democracy would take to scholastic disputations, instead of threatening each other with the mighty atom; and in case they can be made to submit to the discipline of poetry before they resume the ancient debate, they will avoid re-erecting the Tower of Babel, as poetry is communicated before it is understood.

In conclusion, I must admit that I have failed and failed lamentably to prove the necessity of poetry. But before I or anyone else can be expected to achieve success in such an undertaking, we must be told where exactly the necessity of life lies; and until an answer more acceptable than Hegel's has been found, I and people like me must be excused if we end in an elaborate and yet obscure note of interrogation.

# ROSSETTI'S POETRY AND PAINTING : A CORRELATED STUDY

SATYENDRANATH ROY

NORMALLY rewarding, comparative study is richest in discovery when brought to bear on those subtlest manifestations of the human spirit which are briefly and jointly termed 'the fine arts'. The art of one country yields a fuller meaning compared to that of another, and strange truths flash out when the many arts are viewed as one common and continuous record of human hopes and fears and aspirations. In such a context a Michael Angelo, a Blake, or a Rossetti acquires a new significance, and one wistfully wishes that Dante's 'Angel' and Raphael's 'Century of Sonnets' had not gone the way of all rare things.

## II

As collateral means of self-expression, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry and painting supplement and interpret each other. A certain dichotomy in Rossetti's personality tended, however, to keep the two arts rigorously apart in certain periods of his development. Thus it happened that up to 1847 Rossetti was exclusively a poet, with not even one fully finished picture to his credit. He shirked studio-work at Carey's and pleased himself with poetry, although his family was stinting itself to bring him up as a painter. Then after a brief five years, during which the two arts were practised side by side, and mainly by his example Pre-Raphaelitism became a movement in literature as well, Rossetti abjured poetry with all the bitterness of apostasy: "The age of poetry is gone. If anybody has any poetry in him, let him paint." The long fifteen years from 1853 to 1868, during which he found himself as a painter and proselytized Morris and Burne-Jones to his exclusive cult of painting, saw poetry completely laid aside. In 1868, however, he was thrown back on poetry by ill-health and threatened loss of sight, and for the next three years his best work was all in poetry, though he continued to paint perforce for his living. This revived interest in poetry lasted to the end, surviving all cavil, and from 1873 to his death

Rossetti was again, true to his nature, painter and poet at once. Typically again, barring Christianity and Dante, the two arts as practised by Rossetti, have no common source of inspiration. Makey, so potent an inspiration in his painting, does not come into his poetry at all, nor do Shakespeare and Browning who were freely drawn upon in his painting. We also miss in Rossetti's poetry, except in snatches, the enchanting romance of his water-colours. Conversely, there is nowhere in his painting the refreshing contemporaneity of some of his early poems. *Found*, the only modern picture which Rossetti ever attempted—perhaps in rivalry with Bell Scott's ballad of *Rosabelle* and Hunt's *Prick of Conscience*—remained unfinished at his death.

All this notwithstanding, there is no real divorce between Rossetti's poetry and painting. His painting was poetic in that his subjects, as subjects, are renderings in line and colour of poetic ideas and moods, and only incidentally of significant forms. *Beata Beatrix*, now in the Tate Gallery, is a supreme instance of this. Rossetti's own desolation of the spirit, finding an echo in Dante's "Quomodo sedet sola civitas", is embodied in the figure of Beatrice, drawn in devout tenderness from his memory, and his many drawings, of his wife, lately lost in tragic circumstances. Eyes sealed in a trance, yet seeing into the meaning of things in the light of His countenance "Qui est per omnia secula benedictus"; pearly-white upturned face and auburn hair, vague in the dun afternoon light falling in a shaft through the window at which she sits; body relaxed in the languor of the trance; hands fallen apart helplessly on the lap; half her figure vague in a privacy of light, the other half shadowy in the half-light of the chamber—Rossetti's Lizzie-Beatrice is a supreme rendering of "inspired sleep", of a "face charged with dreams." "It is a lyric—the setting in paint of a mood." Antipodal to *Mona Lisa*, it calls, as urgently as *Mona Lisa* does, for an enlargement of the post-Impressionist view of art. Significant forms inhere as much in spiritual states as in the visible universe, and an anecdotal and pure configuration has a formal significance comparable to that into which the visible reality melts in moments of artistic vision.

As poetry passes into painting in Rossetti, so does picture dissolve itself in word and music in poems such as *The Blessed Damozel* and *Love's Nocturn*. This two-way traffic is incessant in Rossetti's Unconscious, and it is the Unconscious or "the Centre of Indifference"

as Schelling has called it, from which creation emanates. Poetry and painting are one in the following piece of autobiography:

"I used to sit on the hearth-rug, listening to him, and look between his knees into the fire till it burned my face, while the sights swarming up in it seemed changed and changed with the music: till the music and the fire and my heart burned together, and I would take paper and pencil, and try in some childish way to fix the shapes that rose within me. For my hope, even then, was to be a painter."  
(St. Agnes of Intercession)

This explains, perhaps, why Rossetti's poetry and painting developed much in the same manner. The many interests of his early work in both narrowed down in his middle years—to 'love' in poetry and "the mystery of womanly beauty" in painting: love which knows not the body from the soul, mystery which haunts and waylays and brings with it "a sense of everlasting things". Attended by a simultaneous narrowing of human contacts, these individual motives so dominated Rossetti's consciousness as to lead him into a world of intangible and twilight things. From this *selva selvaggia* he sought and found release in the objectivity of the ballad in poetry, but there was no corresponding escape in painting owing perhaps to the popularity of the Rossetti-type in the Victorian philistia.

In technique, too, there are obvious correspondences between Rossetti's painting and poetry. The vivid simplicity and lucid diction of Rossetti's early poetry correspond with the tone and method of his water-colours, and the 'laboured splendour' of the sonnets of his middle years with the properties of his oils. So also, the over-elaboration and obscurity of some of his later sonnets find their counterpart in the heavy mannerism and abstraction of his last canvases. There may, again, be some truth in Earle Welby's thought that the licences that Rossetti took with his rhymes in his early poems, their delaying constructions and archaisms find their parallel in the tentativeness and occasional distortion of his early drawings.

### III

We need not agree with Clive Bell's summing up of Rossetti as "a poet with some sense of design," but the fact should be stated,

for whatever it may be worth, that the major Christian and Dantesque motifs of Rossetti's painting were anticipated in his poetry. *Ave* and *Dante at Verona* figure out in words many of the themes rendered later in line and colour. But the sameness of motif does not imply identity either of conception or treatment. The Christian poems and paintings may be usefully studied as a case in point.

The subjects common to Rossetti's religious pictures and poems centre round the figure of the Virgin. Her girlhood, the fulness of her time in the Annunciation, her happy yet 'foreknowing' motherhood, her bereaved days in the house of St. John are treated with a deep human feeling expressing itself in simple details and obvious symbols in the paintings. In their poetic rendering there is a super-added mystery.

In both *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini* it is the humanity of the Virgin which is to the fore. In the first, she sits at an embroidery frame in a balcony weaving, with a lily for a pattern, while her mother sits by her watching her at work. The girlhood has come home to Rossetti not as anything remote or miraculous, but as an exquisitely natural episode in the life of a virtuous girl growing up in a loving home. The accessories of the child angel watering the lily in the foreground and the aureoled Holy Dove perching on the trellis do suggest the Virgin's divinity, but the feeling of the whole composition is fundamentally human. In *Ave* the girlhood is indeed of "work and play and things common to the day" but is yet "full of the awe of meanings unfulfilled." The two sonnets inscribed on the frame of *The Girlhood* read into it a mystery which is hardly there, consonantly omitting the details of the composition.

In *Ecce Ancilla Domini* the Virgin is even more human than in *The Girlhood*. A simple country girl, she has just waked up from sleep. In the chamber bathed in early sunlight, she is seated on her white bed in a slightly awed, but not frightened, posture. To her the Angel, only a youth, and not the crowned and richly-robed figure of the Italian masters, delivers the message that her goodness must bless the race to be, "while she realises in a sudden access of awe and love and pity that all this may not be except through a path of grief and loss." The Annunciation in *Ave* is fraught with a profound mystery. In the gathering shades of the evening, heavy with the breath of a tropical June, the Virgin is giving their evening drink



to her languishing flowers, emblematic of sin-parched humanity,  
athirst for redemption, when suddenly

the awe grew deep,  
As of a day to which all days  
Were footsteps in God's secret ways:  
Until a folding sense of prayer,  
Which is, as God is, everywhere,  
Gathered about thee; and a voice  
Spoke to thee without any noise,  
Being of the silence:—"Hail," it said,  
'Thou that art highly favoured;  
'The Lord is with thee here and now;  
Blessed among all women thou.'

The water-colour *Annunciation* showing the Virgin bathing among the lilies is exquisite in its humanity, though there is mystery too in there in the wings of the Angel assuming the shape of the Cross as he stands before the Virgin in gracious obeisance, delivering the message.

Mary's motherhood is rendered directly in *The Passover in the Holy Family*, and obliquely in Rossetti's sonnets on Memmelinck's *The Virgin and the Child* and Michael Angelo's *The Holy Family*. Briefly touched upon in *Ave*, the Passover motif is elaborately worked out in a four-figure composition in painting; and although there is a suggestion of mystery in the troubled face of the boy Christ as he looks into the bowl filled with the blood of the Paschal Lamb and in Mary's action of gathering bitter herbs, it is no more mysterious than the version in *Ave* which makes the yearly Passover a continuous intimation of the final sacrament,

"when He,  
The bitter cup about to quaff,  
Should break the bread and eat thereof."

Humanity and mystery are in a fine balance in *Mary in the House of St. John* and the poetic rendering of the same theme in *Ave*. Rossetti shows us "the new home, so strangely ignored by painters of the sacred tale." In both the Mother of Christ is seen sitting at a window watching for the Second Coming, the sick despair of deferred hope in her heart partly assuaged by the figure of the Cross which the window bars assume in the half-light of the gloom.

ing, in the picture, and by the endurance of the stars in the evening sky supporting her faith, in the poem.

Unanticipated in poetry, the sketch for Mary Magdalene (interpreted later in a sonnet), the fully finished picture on the same theme, known as *Mary Magdalene in the House of Simon the Pharisee*, and *The Head of Christ* in the picture, later treated as a separate subject, are all instinct with humanity. The sudden conversion of the Magdalene, perhaps the most dramatic situation in the Gospel history, is rendered in the sketch with an overpowering intensity, which is even more excruciating in the interpreting sonnet:

Oh! loose me! Seest thou not my Bridegroom's face  
That draws me to Him? For His feet my kiss,  
My hair, my tears He craves to-day.

.....

He needs me, He calls me: He loves me: let me go!

—this to her lover, aghast at her frenzied tearing off of the roses from her hair, and her mad rush up the stairs for the room of Simon's house where sits Jesus outlined against a window. The head of Christ is that of a gentle dreamer, "the peasant poet whom women and children love." Divinity is there aureoling his noble head, but suggestion of the fulfilling sacrifice is also there in the slightly drawn brow and the trailing vine symbolic of sacrifice.

These religious pictures are the evident outcome of a deep spiritual necessity. They were not surely painted just because Rossetti was a revivalist, nor because he was eager to qualify for the mystic initials, P.R.B. The diploma pieces of Hunt and Millais of 1849 were secular in theme, and the English Pre-Raphaelites were unlike their German precursors, Cornelius and Overbeck, in not limiting themselves to art solely in the service of religion. Rossetti turned to religious themes because they were closest to his heart, and the manner in which inspiration triumphs over imperfection of technique in one and all of them is proof enough of their spontaneity.

But for intimate confession of faith Rossetti's poems are further-going than his pictures. What is symbolically hinted at in the pictures is direct and overt in the poems. The two remaining religious pictures of Rossetti—*Bethlehem Gate* and the *Llandaff Tryptich*—are doctrinal in their symbolic renderings of the Christian concepts

of "victory through suffering" and "peace on earth and goodwill to mankind". Yet for an actual confession of faith we have to search among Rossetti's religious poems. The consolation of prayer is feelingly brought out, although in an apparently impersonal way, in *Returning to Brussels* where the Flemish peasant women come to the little wayside shrine to pray when life ails them—to weep and seek consolation of the Virgin in their sorrow. The poet has felt in his own life the lightening of the load that comes of Holy Communion:

On a fair Sabbath day, when his banquet is spread,  
It is pleasant to feast with the Lord!

*Reverence breathes in every line, even a certain ritualism in the two Church-porch sonnets addressed to his sisters Maria and Christina. What a peace it is to escape from the glare and squabble outside into the silence, and the sudden dimness and deep prayer within the shrine, and what a wrench it is to leave the presence of the Lord to walk again in the evil street!*

All the religious poems and pictures of Rossetti came between 1849 and 1858. Taken together, the pictures show a certain humanizing of Christianity, not unlike that in Unitarianism. The nineteenth century tended to make the visible universe a proof of the goodness of the Invisible rather than an inference from it. Christianity was not on this view a record of exceptional events but a glorification of the common heritage of humanity—the Gospel history is not anything isolated from human experience. "Their Christ is re-incarnate in the noblest manhood of all time; their Virgin Mary lives in the simple girl that wakes to the charm, the mysterious power and responsibility of womanhood." Revivalists as they were supposed to be, the Pre-Raphaelites were true children of their times in sharing in this attitude, in "drawing their inspiration from the beauty and glory of the visible universe, and in their faith in the inherent dignity and sacredness of human life." It was not merely the aesthetic appeal of Catholic Christianity which drew Rossetti to it, as Swinburne supposed. The poems do refute such a view, if the pictures do not. Rossetti passed through a distinct religious phase in his youth. In those early days Rossetti still viewed the world against the background of the Rossetti ladies, and he could not re-

main untouched by the devout Anglicanism of his mother, which, influencing his two sisters, led Maria to enter a convent, and Christina to renounce love and marriage. Even his father's anti-Papal interpretation of Dante bespoke a strong counter-conviction. Rossetti's fundamentally earnest nature, his pronounced mother-complex and aesthetic sensibility drew him irresistibly to religion. But this fervid religious phase was presently to pass into the less exalted but more human Beatrice phase which held him to the last. The faith which fulfilled itself in Rossetti's religious pictures and poems was muted into the mystery of human love.

## TWINS IN SUFFERING : DOSTOEVSKY AND BAUDELAIRE

BUDDHADEVA BOSE

LAST summer, while preparing a chronology of the life of Charles Baudelaire, I hit upon a fact which I had not found in any book: Baudelaire and Dostoevsky were born in the same year. I must confess I was strangely moved by this discovery; it seemed to me providential rather than a mere coincidence, something destined and purposeful rather than blindly concurrent. It was marvellous to reflect that in the same year this poor planet of ours was permitted to receive two individuals whose life's work transformed the very conception of the novel and the poem. With them 'a terrible beauty' was born in literature.

The year was 1821. Romanticism had not yet arrived in France, but Pushkin, having read Byron in French versions, was laying the foundations of modern Russian literature. England, where romanticism and the modern novel originated, was still secure in literary leadership. *Don Juan* and the Waverley Novels were in process; Shelley had published *Prometheus Unbound*. During the next decade Paris will be hit by the Dandies and Anglomania, Goethe dead, and French romanticism win the day in the Battle of *Hernani*. But by then the 'fanatic hearts' of England will have stopped beating and a highly domesticated 'Lawn' Tennyson begun to prevail. The next half-century will see the ascendancy of England in world-politics and, in the same measure, her decline in poetry and literature. Indeed the two facts are inter-related; it was England's empire which caused her spiritual anaemia. Through those long and gilded eras associated with the names of Queen Victoria and King Edward the English writers were on the whole too smug and provincial to mean much to the big world outside their realm. While Thackeray depicted English manners and Tennyson the English countryside, germinal poetry moved to France and the novel to Russia.

I am anxious to be brief and I beg the reader's indulgence for not mentioning Dickens and the French realistic school. We all know that their influence on world-fiction was large and important, but who of us can deny that of all the novelists of the nineteenth cen-

ture, the most significant for us today, and those with whom we are most intimate, hailed from a country with little history and apparently no 'tradition', a country which appeared on the eastern horizon of Europe only in the century before Pushkin's? Marvellous was the leap with which Russia entered into world-history and world-literature. Russia, veiled in fog for centuries, untouched by the Renaissance and untutored by classical ideals, rooted to Byzantine Christianity and the rough native vernacular—how was it that she produced, all in the course of the nineteenth century, the dazzling series of writers from Pushkin to Anton Tchekhov? We are forced to conclude that her weakness in culture proved to be her strength in creativity: free from the perpetual tutelage of Aristotle, from the constrictions of French rationalism and what André Gide calls the Castilian pride of Western nations, she, a gigantic and eager virgin, was no sooner exposed to the seeds of Western Europe than she shocked the world with a productivity of which the only historical parallel is Goethe's Germany. How intense this absorption was, is seen from the promptness and opulence with which the Russian writers gave back what they had initially borrowed from the West—Pushkin and Lermontov from Byron, Gogol from Hoffmann, and Dostoevsky from Dickens: the least one can say in this matter is that the balance is rather on the credit side. Likewise, the Dandies and Bouzingsos of France were proud to imitate English ways, and yet it was the French poets from Baudelaire to Laforgue who set the tone for modern poetry. In London, as the nineteenth century drew to its close, Yeats and his friends realised that they must 'purify poetry of all that was not poetry'; and by poetry was meant poetry 'as written by Verlaine and Baudelaire'. And Baudelaire and Verlaine were the two poets whom Rilke rapturously quoted and referred to in *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, a book conceived soon after his arrival in Paris in 1902.

If we were required to name two writers, one in verse and the other in prose, who lifted the curtain on the twentieth century and with whom modern literature begins, it is these two names that would rise instantly to our lips: the poet of *Les Fleurs du Mal* and the creator of the Karamazovs. In the English-speaking world the twentieth century did not begin till the appearance of *Prufrock*, but France and Russia, thanks to Baudelaire and Dostoevsky, brought forth the twentieth century well before the nineteenth was out.

Without knowing each other's work or being aware of each other's existence, they collaborated on the completion of a great work: the creation of the idea of modern literature and the myth of the twentieth-century man.

Both were enemies of common sense and utilitarianism, hungry for guilt and beatitude. Certain passages of *Notes from Underground* read almost like a prose commentary on *Les Fleurs*. What they reveal is truly a Baudelairean world transferred to St. Petersburg, a world where the practical man is morally deformed and the man of conscience utterly useless to society. Thomas Mann has noted that the hero of the *Notes* is in reality a non-hero or anti-hero, and this applies with equal force to the ubiquitous 'I' of the *Fleurs*. Both are representatives of the free man, the child of the spirit who refuses to conform, sick and incapable of resolution because of excessive consciousness. Modern society threatens to crush him; it is too late in the day to revolt in the Byronic fashion; the best he can do is to go underground and assert the value of the individual—not in the hope of influencing the times but as a mode of self-knowledge. And that is what these two non-heroes do, in a characteristically confessional and purgatorial style, crying out from the depth of a darkness rent by the lightning of a terrifying clairvoyance.

Great literature is often of mean origin, as Diotima held love to be. A source of the *Fleurs* was the so-called charnel-house poets of the eighteen-twenties, remembered today chiefly for Baudelaire's interest in them. On Dostoevsky an important foreign influence was the 'frenetic' school of French romanticism, which stimulated him to explore the psychology of cruelty and self-abasement. But what was crude and sensational in the models, merely physically sensational, gained a spiritual dimension in the works of these two seers whose path to Heaven lay through sin and profanation. The stock they took over was already rather shop-soiled—corpses and crime, madness and hysteria, snake-like women and lovers who love ignominy; but when the next generation received it, it had all become radiantly new and meaningful, charged with an anguished and human urgency. Dostoevsky plans a 'thriller' and writes *The Double*, an acute study of the duality of man's character; he begins a crime story and ends on the theme of salvation. In like manner death and putrefaction in Baudelaire have reference to those ultimate questions that man, who is not mere animate matter, is bound to ask himself

sometimes. They both burned with the same hot flame: a love of God made strong and valid by a thorough knowledge of the ways of Satan. And the fuel of that flame was their whole existence.

'There are in every man, always, two simultaneous allegiances, one to God, the other to Satan.' 'God and the Devil are for ever contending, and the battlefield is the heart of man.' The same thought, and almost the same words; yet the first is from Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals* and the second from *The Karamazovs*. 'I consider myself an intelligent man only because all my life I have been able neither to begin nor to finish anything,' says Dostoevsky's underground man, And Baudelaire: 'To be a useful person has always appeared to me something particularly horrible.' 'Beauty is a terrible and awful thing! . . . Here all boundaries meet and all contradictions exist side by side!' It is Dmitri Karamazov who is speaking, but the accent may as well be of the Parisian poet who sees in Beauty a sphinx, ambivalent between Heaven and Hell, engaging man in a duel 'in which he shrieks with terror before being overcome.' How remarkable that, with all their obvious differences, these two minds should intersect at so many points! 'Woman is *natural*, that is to say abominable.' Harmonising with this neat French epigram rises a shrill Slavonic voice: 'The real normal man, as Mother Nature wished to see him, is stupid and should be stupid. The antithesis of the normal man is the man of acute consciousness, who has come not out of the lap of Nature but out of a retort.' Consciousness produces what Dostoevsky calls inertia and Baudelaire ennui, a painful and exhilarating prolongation of the time-sense. The underground man regards his fortieth year as 'extreme old age', and at thirty Baudelaire is able to ask himself: 'If I have lived three minutes in one . . . am I not ninety years old?'

The two men have essentially the same vision, the same scale of values. Their connection is umbilical: nurtured by two widely separated cultures, one logical and aristocratic, the other mystic and revelational, they are nevertheless twins in the pursuit of suffering. I say pursuit, meaning that they do not see suffering merely as the absence of happiness, but as a positive value and perhaps the supreme value of human existence. Suffering, they seem to argue, denotes a desire for the impossible, and the desire for the impossible is the mark of the hero and the saint. Suffering that interests them is congenial rather than circumstantial, not to be removed by technology and



social reform. It is not as social types that Baudelaire treats the poor and the desolate, but as his own counterparts, figures of an infinite sadness in whom he sees himself reflected. His widows and clowns and rag-pickers are beyond our pity or commiseration; they have grown larger than life-size by having made suffering their career. In like manner, Dostoevsky's characters suffer as if by instinct, as normal people satisfy hunger or sex.

Art is willed, and life is a chain of accidents. Yet what the works of the two men tell us, their biographies perfectly corroborate. Examples of sufferers they not only were, but were almost determined to be. Here again we come upon a string of coincidences: syphilis and epilepsy; a discordant step-father and a parasitic step-son; frustration in love; unending humiliation and debts;—but for Dostoevsky's year in Siberia the portions would seem to be equally divided. But the point is not what happened to them, but what they made of what did. There is enough to show that they were not weak or passive men who merely let unpleasant things befall them. Steadily they sought and courted suffering, went out of their way to meet it, intuitively realising its need. With both men, suffering is something to be earned and the one thing never to be dissipated.

Baudelaire hated 'good nature', at any rate as manifested in George Sand, that 'prodigious blockhead' whom Dostoevsky warmly admired. This difference in literary taste need not make us pause, for Dostoevsky's good-natured characters are not so in George Sand's manner: they do not wish away the ills of the world and are conscious of the value of suffering. It is Stepan Trofimovitch in *The Possessed*, in the shaping of whom Dostoevsky must have helped himself to a big dose of Dickensian comicality, it is that mild, affable and ludicrous ex-radical who insists that 'unhappiness is as necessary to man as happiness.' 'I believe that the fundamental need of the Russian soul is: thirst for suffering,' Dostoevsky wrote in his *Diary of a Writer*, having believed all his life that suffering was a privilege of the Russians and the Russian people could suffer more richly and creatively than any other nation on earth. Shattered by his own novels, and by words like *The Overcoat* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, we could as well have taken him at his word, had we not known what he did not: that in one of those West European capitals which he stigmatised as 'godless', someone had made the astounding discovery that the function of the poet in the modern times was to suffer on behalf of all

Let us note it was an American, a child of a young and vigorous country far removed from the perplexities of Europe, that revealed this truth to Baudelaire. In Edgar Poe Baudelaire saw his own image, the type of the modern poet who martyrs himself to art. On the specific question of art Dostoevsky said but little, and though his underground man is a great reader who wants to translate literature into life, the few professional writers flitting through his novels are very minor and the least sympathetic of his characters. Yet there is a striking resemblance between his most appealing creations and the 'pious poet' of Baudelaire: Prince Myshkin, for example, who takes upon himself the whole mad load of human suffering, but, with all his conscience, does not and cannot effect the slightest change in his own immediate surroundings, let alone averting the horrible murder which he foresaw before setting his eyes on the victim and within a couple of minutes of his first meeting with the would-be murderer. Myshkin's virtue lies in his blazing consciousness, his sense of responsibility for all. His task is not to save the world, but to *feel* it. Like the poet of the *Fleurs* and *Paris Spleen*, he can enter into the wails of the sick and fallen, but their wounds he does not pretend to be able to heal. No question his spirit is that of the poet, as Baudelaire conceived the poet to be.

Poets are contemplatives, and so are Dostoevsky's great characters, not excepting 'devils' like Stavrogin and Ivan Karamazov. Now these 'devils', as André Gide has pointed out, never act on their own but through others. They have agents to do things for them, to carry out the fiendish schemes they hatch in their fever and isolation. And these agents are cringing and villainous slaves. There is Smerdyakov for Ivan and Pyotor Verhovensky for Stavrogin. As Baudelaire loathed action, so in Dostoevsky all action is loathsome. Why is this so? The reason is the clash of their times and their temperaments; one strenuously reformistic, the other deeply religious. By the mid-nineteenth century the work of helping one's neighbours had passed on to professional social workers; torn from its moral and personal context, it had become a matter for committees and State departments. All action tended to be official and regimented; the private person felt relieved of responsibility. But it was only the private person who could, if he willed it, do good, for it took a good man to do a good action, and a good man was an individual whom society had immobilised. This explains the impotence of Prince Myshkin and the dread-

ful efficiency of Smerdyakov. And this is what Baudelaire had in mind when he defined progress as 'the individual relying upon his neighbours to do his work.'

'Each of us is responsible for everybody else,' was Dostoevsky's insistent cry. Human inter-dependence, as he saw it, was rooted in religion, for 'if God did not exist everything would be permitted.' It is the murky Smerdyakov who thinks this thought: in Dostoevsky God is an obsession with all who get involved in crime and ignominy. Clearly, their need of God is desperate. Let us note in passing that Alyosha, the only Karamazov capable of a good action, seldom discusses the question of God; we feel he accepts too easily and we see he has never really suffered, not even for his brothers' sake. And let us remind ourselves of Father Zossima's injunction: Alyosha ~~must~~ know the world and the evil in it before he returns to the way of God. There is little doubt that, if the sequel to *The Karamazovs* were written, we would have seen Alyosha 'sinning his way to Jesus' like all his brethren in spirit.

Through the works of these two visionaries, like the blood-stream in our bodies, circulates the thought that sin leads to suffering and suffering to redemption. It is impossible to live without sinning: the question is whether we *know* it or not. All sin, but only a few do so consciously and suffer on that account. And among those who do suffer it is only the most rare individuals who can actually break through to bliss. Yet there is merit in suffering itself, in remembering God with an anguished intensity, in the manner of Myshkin and Dmitri Karamazov, and even of Fedya, the stealer of church property. Suffering such as theirs is spiritual, though sometimes externalised in poverty or disease. It would be easy to show that in the modern age, despite or because of its so-called materialism, literature and the arts have acquired a new soul. What has happened? Suffering has invaded them, and made them profoundly spiritual, whether in the conception of love, or beauty, or man. And of this there are no examples nobler than the works of Dostoevsky and Baudelaire.

March, 1959.

# FRANZ KAFKA : THE JUDGEMENT

WERNER REHFELD

THE stories and novels of Franz Kafka have often been interpreted; but the interpretations put forward by theologians, sociologists, philosophers and philologists differ so much from each other that a reader searching for orientation might at first feel disconcerted. But after no more than a short study of the secondary literature he will come to realise that the works of Kafka are not as ambiguous as they might appear from the numerous interpretations. They only reveal different aspects, starting from different formulations. Hence the great number of essays and books about Kafka should not be understood as signifying that the works were in themselves obscure and that all interpretations would therefore be possible. The research on Kafka is so far advanced today that his whole work can be traced back to a small number of basic problems. However complicatedly a plot might be developed, and however fantastic the comparisons and metaphors might be, Kafka starts from only a few basic problems which give the seemingly unconnected manifoldness a centre.

Moreover, neither the reader nor the interpreter should forget that a story or a novel by Kafka has, in the first place, to be considered as a consistent work of art, standing for itself. Therefore, every interpretation should keep as close as possible to the text. From this point of view some prominent interpretations must straightway be rejected—they isolate from the general context of the work a definite problem, take it as a premise and follow it up logically and consistently, without regard for the course of the action. Thus, there have been found in professional quarters such grotesque and absurd results as, to quote only one example, did not even shrink from saying that Kafka prepared the way for the Hitler regime.

However fascinating it might be to consider the Kafka criticism in detail this has to be renounced in the framework of this investigation. Let us, however, say that every interpretation has to follow solely the text and its logic. If this criterion, which should be obvious for every historian of literature, is used for the evaluation of the secondary literature many interpretations will be eliminated.

Above all, the attentive reader should always be concerned with

the text. This is not easy in the case of Kafka; hence I should like to draw attention to one critic whose works are also available in English. Martin Buber, at present a Professor at the university of Tel Aviv, has interpreted the works of Kafka in his capacity as a philosopher of religion, and he has realised at a very early stage that Kafka has been mainly concerned with a religious theme: he was always haunted by the problem of individual guilt in relation to an absolutely valid judging and punishing authority. From this starting-point the two novel-fragments *The Trial* and *The Castle* may be easily interpreted. Thus it becomes clear that with Kafka the motif of the court of judgement has central significance; because it is before such a court that the questions of guilt, atonement, law and punishment are posed. And these are the very concepts from which the whole of Kafka's work stems. So much by way of introduction. Now let us proceed to the exact analysis of a story.

### THE JUDGEMENT

Franz Kafka wrote his best known story in the course of one single night. It is one of the few writings which Kafka permitted to be printed; he seems to have known that with *The Judgement* he has achieved something outstanding. The importance of this story for the history of literature is revealed by the fact that in the new histories of literature the modern period begins with *The Judgement*.

### SYNOPSIS

Georg Bendemann is the son of a rich businessman. Since his mother's death he alone has been looking after the business. "Perhaps during his mother's lifetime his father's insistence on having everything his own way in the business had hindered him from developing any real activity of his own, perhaps since her death his father had become less aggressive, although he was still active in the business, perhaps it was mostly due to an accidental run of good fortune—which was very probable indeed—but at any rate during those two years the business had developed in a most unexpected way, the staff had had to be doubled, the turnover was five times as great, no doubt about it, further progress lay just ahead."

Thus Georg is a successful businessman. In contrast with his success stands the failure of his friend who has emigrated to Petersburg.

Georg ponders "how this friend had actually run away to Russia some years before, being dissatisfied with his prospects at home. Now he was carrying on a business in Petersburg, which had flourished to begin with but long been going downhill. So he was wearing himself out to no purpose in a foreign country." The two friends do not differ only in the fact that Georg works with success and the friend in Petersburg without success. "By his own account he (the friend) had no regular connection with the colony of his fellow countrymen out there and almost no intercourse with Russian families, so that he was resigning himself to becoming a permanent bachelor." Georg, on the other hand, writes to this friend: "I have saved my best news to the end. I have got engaged to a Miss Frieda Brandensfeld, a girl from a well-to-do family, who only came to live here a long time after you went away, so that you're hardly likely to know her. There will be time to tell you more about her later, for today let me just say that I am very happy and as between you and me the only difference in our relationship is that instead of a quite ordinary kind of friend you will now have in me a happy friend. Besides that, you will acquire in my fiancée, who sends you her warm greetings and soon write you herself, a genuine friend of the opposite sex, which is not without importance to a bachelor." Whereas the friend in Petersburg makes contact with nobody and prepares for final bachelorhood, Georg Bendemann has got engaged to a girl from a well-to-do family. Hence they have developed since their last meeting in every respect so differently that they obviously do not suit one another any more. But the relation of Georg with his friend in Petersburg is strange for yet another reason. "Georg had shrunk from letting his friend know about his business success, and if he were to do it now retrospectively it would certainly look peculiar.

"So Georg confined himself to giving his friend unimportant items of gossip such as rise at random in the memory when one is idly thinking things over on a quiet Sunday. All he desired was to leave undisturbed the idea of his home town which his friend must have built up to please himself during the long interval." Thus the friend does not know that Georg has built up in the meantime a great business. Georg affirms that he has not written anything about this to his friend because he did not want to disturb his friend and his 'ideas' of his home town. It will transpire that this ostensible motive is in reality only a subterfuge.

Already at the beginning of the story it is striking to note how strangely Georg's bride behaves towards the friend in Petersburg. "So he won't be coming to our wedding," she said, "and yet I have a right to get to know all your friends." "I don't want to trouble him," answered Georg. "Don't misunderstand me, he would probably come, at least I think so, but he would feel that his hand had been forced and he would be hurt, perhaps he would envy me and certainly he'd be discontented and without being able to do anything about his discontent he'd have to go away again alone." "Since your friends are like that, Georg, you shouldn't have got engaged at all." And then Georg explains: "That's the kind of man I am and he'll just have to take me as I am," he said to himself, "I can't cut myself to another pattern that might make a more suitable friend for him."

Already at this point it becomes clear that Georg Bendemann fears a discussion with his friend and hence wants to avoid it. In his relation to his father the real motives of his behaviour become understandable. Therefore we should go into this father and son relationship with extensive quotations. "At last he went out of his room across a small lobby into his father's room which he had not entered for months. There was in fact no need for him to enter it, since he always saw his father daily at business and they took their midday meal together at an eating house; in the evening, it was true, each did as he pleased, yet even then, unless Georg—as mostly happened—went out with friends or, more recently, visited his fiancée, they always sat for a while, each with his newspaper, in their common sitting room." Father and son meet outside the office only accidentally; they hardly speak to each other, which fact enhances the significance of the following dialogue. From the beginning there is a strong tension between them. The father too is a source of danger to Georg. He lives withdrawn and for himself: this already is a criticism of the son. "It surprised Georg how dark his father's room was even on this sunny morning. . . . His father was sitting by the window in a corner hung with various mementoes of Georg's dead mother." Now begins the dialogue between father and son. Immediately Georg realises how dangerous the conversation might turn out for him. "My father is still a giant of a man," said Georg to himself. . . . "In business hours he's quite different," he was thinking. "How solidly he sits here with his arms crossed." Hence the son has to reckon with the opposition and criticism of his father as he tells him

that he has written to his friend in Petersburg about his engagement. "But since we're talking about it, about this letter, I beg you, Georg, don't deceive me. It's a trivial affair, it's hardly worth mentioning, so don't deceive me. Do you really have this friend in Petersburg?" Georg tries to avoid the discussion. "A thousand friends wouldn't make up to me for my father. . . . We'll have to make a change in your way of living. But a radical change. . . . I'll get the doctor to come and we'll follow his orders. . . . I'll put you to bed now for a little." Powerless and weak the father stands facing his son. Georg thinks he will be able to get out of the conversation, but the next moment the change transpires: the seemingly powerless and weak father disposes of an enormous power: "'Georg,' said his father in a low voice, without moving. Georg knelt down at once beside his father. In the old man's weary face he saw the pupils, over-large, fixedly looking at him from the corners of the eyes." Georg actually succeeds in soothing his father. He was even able to bring him to bed. "'Am I well covered up?' asked the father once more, seeming to be strangely intent upon the answer. 'Don't worry, you're well covered up.' 'No!' cried his father, cutting short the answer, threw the blankets off with a strength that sent them all flying in a moment and stood up on the bed. With one hand only he lightly touched the ceiling. 'You wanted to cover me up, I know, my young sprig, but I'm far from being covered up yet. And even if this is the last strength I have, it's enough for you, too much for you. Of course I know your friend. He would have been a son after my heart. That's why you've been playing him false all these years. Why else?' . . . Georg stared at the bogey conjured up by his father. His friend in Petersburg, whom his father suddenly knew so well, seized his imagination as never before." The father becomes the judge. During the last years he has closely watched his son. "'Because she (the bride) lifted up her skirts,' his father began to flute, 'because she lifted her skirts up like this, the nasty creature,' and mimicking her he lifted his shirt so high that one could see the scar on his thigh from his war wound, 'because she lifted up her skirts like this and this you made up to her, and in order to make free with her undisturbed you have disgraced your mother's memory, betrayed your friend and stuck your father into bed so that he can't move.'" Georg no longer has the power to get near his father. "You think you have strength enough to come over here and that you're only



hanging back of your own accord. Don't be too sure! I am still much the stronger of us two. All by myself I might have had to give way, but your mother has given me so much of her strength that I've established a fine connection with your friend." "Then follows the judgement of the father: "So now you know what else there was in the world besides yourself, till now you've known only about yourself! An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly you have been a devilish human being!—And therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning!" Georg felt himself urged from the room." He hurries to a bridge. "He swung himself over, like the distinguished gymnast he had once been in his youth, to his parents' pride. . . . He spied between the railings a motor-bus coming which would easily cover the noise of his fall, called in a low voice: 'Dear parents, I have always loved you,' and let himself drop. At this moment an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge."

#### AN INTERPRETATION

##### *Georg Knechtman and his father*

*Georg Knechtman, too, through his work, as enlarged the business which he took over from his father that "the business was the same as your and father possess by just about." The father does not acknowledge these successes unhesitatingly; because the initiative and activity of the son have led to a situation where father and son meet only occasionally at meals, but do not converse even then; on the contrary, each remains busy with his newspaper. A conversation, a dialogue between father and son is, however, not possible under these circumstances. Let us consider the reasons.*

While the son works successfully in the business, the father withdraws to a dark room to reflect, secluded from the world, upon his wife's death. The son travels as a respectable and socially recognized merchant throughout the world to contract deals. The father, at that time, remains sitting in his room. "The death of our dear mother hit me harder than it did you," says the father during the discussion. Thus, father and son, since the death of the mother have been living in an unbridgeable opposition; the son concentrates his whole work and effort on the enlargement of the business. His pretensions are limited by no sense of proportion. He is intoxicated with his successes and forgets in preoccupation with his work to reflect upon

questions which concern his humanness. Even his mother's death is not a sufficient motif for reflection. The father, on the contrary, has been concentrating, since his wife's death, on the significance of death. And out of this meditation he also arrives at a changed relation to life, with which, however, the son in his boundless activity is in complete opposition.

But this father and son relationship is not a personal and individual situation only. Georg represents a time which values man merely according to his practical success. The time of the so-called 'late industrialism' has degraded man by means of the organization of the process of work to a quantity, a number. He 'functions' in the framework of a great and for him uncontrollable mechanism. Georg Bendemann can be interpreted from this angle. He himself measures his qualities by the amount of his success in business; he degrades himself to a quantity, to a measurable size against his former circumstances and against his competitors. Especially the fact that Georg recognizes no boundaries which could limit his pretensions ~~are~~ become dangerous. The man who gives up his ~~I~~ for the sake of temporal success can never again withdraw himself from the pressure of striving for gain. Finally he stands under a devilish compulsion which he has to obey even when it turns against him. "Actually you have been a devilish human being," the father explains to him in his judgment.

The father, on the other hand, has been led by his wife's death to reflect upon the question of the aims and meaning of his life. He remains sitting in a dark room, whereas the socially respected son travels throughout the world in order to transact deals. The father, therefore, is the authority in the course of the action which stands in opposition to the way of life of his son. The father knows that Georg intoxicates himself with his successes in business in such a manner that for the sake of his business career he forgets the question of the aims and meaning of his life. Thus, the father from the beginning embodies the admonishing conscience which Georg finally has to face.

### *The friend in Petersburg*

At a decisive moment in the discussion with his son the father declares: "I know your friend well. He would have been a son after my heart. That's why you've been playing him false all these years." From this it transpires that the father and the friend in Petersburg

belong together. Both stand against Georg.

The friend in Petersburg contrasts with Georg in every respect. Whereas Georg has uncommon success, the friend wears himself out to no purpose in a foreign country. Whereas Georg can get engaged to a girl from a well-to-do family, the friend resigns himself to becoming a permanent bachelor. Whereas Georg has attained recognition and respect, the friend has no contact with the members of the colony in Petersburg. The two have lived apart because of their completely different development in such a way that a meeting---as in the case of father and son---could not lead to a fruitful conversation but must become a dispute.

We should enquire into the reasons why Georg Bendemann has not enlightened his friend about the development of his business. Is it really from consideration? "He would have been a son after my heart. That's why you've been playing him false all these years." That the father enters into an alliance with the friend in Petersburg must be interpreted, in my opinion, as a correspondence of ideas. Hence Georg has to fear his friend as much as his father. Therefore he has not communicated the prosperity of his business because he must reckon with his criticism. This he wants to avoid, because it would cause him to waver in his activity. The friend in Petersburg could have pointed out to him that his pretensions were unlimited; that he was losing himself in excess and hence the catastrophe of his existence would be unavoidable. Against such a reproach which would force him to a reconsideration and examination of his aims Georg defends himself. Hence he deceives his friend in Petersburg not out of consideration, but out of fear of possible criticism.

### *The bride*

Although compared with the other persons of the plot she has not been represented in detail, for understanding of the whole and for the character of Georg she is of special importance. "Because she lifted her skirts up like this, the nasty creature, because she lifted up her skirts like this and this you made up to her, and in order to make free with her undisturbed you have disgraced your mother's memory, betrayed your friend and stuck your father into bed so that he can't move." This portion of the text clarifies the connexions---all the persons who appear or are mentioned during the course of the action stand in one frontline against Georg Bendemann. Only

the bride forms an exception, as through her Georg Bendemann is characterised and therewith put in opposition to the others.

Georg is as exorbitant in his relation to the bride as in the pretensions which concern his career. Here also he recognizes no authority who could admonish him and make him think of moderation. Even the memory of his mother he "disgraces" as she could disquiet his conscience. The bride represents for him only an opportunity to live out his vitality. There is nowhere any mention that he takes an interest in her personality. And therefore the bride is not described in detail. In the whole framework she fulfils no more than the function of characterising Georg Bendemann in his private life.

In his relation to the bride Georg Bendemann appears as unruly and immoderate in another aspect as he is in that of the successful businessman who recognizes no limits. He fears the authority that could point this out to him. Hence at first he told his friend in Petersburg nothing about his engagement.

#### *The father's judgement*

The story reaches its climax when the father sentences his son to death by drowning. Immediately we ask where the father finds this power to triumph over his seemingly powerful son.

The plot develops in such a manner that the father appears more and more powerless, while the son gets more and more sure of himself and powerful. But suddenly comes the climax—the father is the punishing judge. The point of apparently greatest weakness is followed by a moment of absolute authority which brooks no resistance. Kafka has presented this idea again and again in his stories and novels. Here indeed we have penetrated into the focal point of his works.

We have established that Georg tries to live without criticism and self-criticism. He avoids every admonition, which is the reason why he does not want to face the father nor the friend in Petersburg either in a talk or in a letter—above all, he avoids a meeting with himself, which means he tries to kill his conscience. With this the main regulating principle for this story—and for all of Kafka—is discovered. However relative and questionable all decisions and resorts might be, there is nevertheless one absolutely secure and reliable authority—conscience, which can only be unquiet and bad. Georg Bendemann has really lived against this authority—he has misjudged himself as merchant and as bridegroom. But the more

he endeavours to overlook the criticism of his conscience the more terrible must the moment become when this conscience can no longer be ignored. The sentence of the father can only be interpreted as his own conscience becoming the judge; and from this power there is no escape. He now is standing under a coercion which he can no longer escape. "Georg feels himself urged from the room." He runs to the bridge to let himself fall into the water. But nobody takes any interest in his death. "He spied between the railings a motor-bus coming which would easily cover the noise of his fall." The hectic activity of the world to which he has subscribed without reserve allows no concentration on death and on conscience. Nevertheless conscience remains the absolutely valid and judging authority which nobody can escape in the long run.

#### SUMMARY

Again and again it has been asked whether Franz Kafka is an author who has succumbed to pessimism and nihilism. From the results which we have found while interpreting *The Judgement* we must deny this proposition. On the contrary, in a time which seemed to have lost all absolute criteria, Kafka discovered an authority, the absoluteness of which is inescapable. The motif of the court has always to be interpreted as a call of conscience.

The moment which shows the irruption of the authoritative power into Georg's existence seems especially coercive in the way it is expressed. This is because we have here a process which leads to its own revulsion: the more conscience is subjugated, the more powerfully and terribly it affirms itself. This process, which is beyond logical control, Kafka has represented. He had to use grotesque metaphors and ways of expression, otherwise he could not have taken into consideration the conditions of his historical situation. Therefore Kafka must be placed among the greatest authors of the 20th century; he has faced up to the circumstances of his time and has not searched for some hold or rescue in a questionable tradition. In a concrete situation he has found an absolute authority - bad conscience. Thereby he has put the men of this time in touch with transcendence. Thus Kafka has really to be considered as a religious author.

Translated from the German by  
COUNT A. KEYSERLING

# FATE IN DRAMA

NARENDRANATH BHATTACHARYA

MAN's life is mysterious and it admits of inexplicable events. Where no apparent causal relation can be discovered, we try to comprehend the happening in terms of Fate. This, however, is not a matter of mere compromise or consolation. Indeed our experience tells us that life is inscrutable and not all our questions can be answered by science and philosophy.

But literature succeeds where science and philosophy fail. That is why man creates literature with the help of life's deepest mysteries. Here in this creation is man's own reflection—his attempt to discover his own self, his quest for the mysteries of his own life. And this gives him consolation and happiness. This perhaps is the reason why the truth of art is a 'thing of joy for ever'; and this truth in fact is the essential characteristic—the *sine qua non*—of great literature. Tragedy expresses this more accurately and beautifully than does comedy, since it is only through the trials of grief and misery that the true nature of man's life comes out. Tragedy thus gives a more truthful representation of life's deeper mysteries.

Perfect and accomplished tragedy has not been produced in the literature of every country, because different peoples have different attitudes to life. But tragedy does exist in some form or other in all the great literatures.)

What is behind the tragedy of man? The scientific-rational mind would very easily meet this question: man himself is responsible for his catastrophe. Tragedy comes upon him from his own errors, his own *faux pas*. Freud also takes this line. And yet reason and psychology fail to account for many bewildering and mysterious events that befall man and he is bound to cry out rather in helpless submission:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

The Western literary view-point is in keeping with the rational-psychological analysis. Tragedy is the product of man's inherent

weaknesses which make him commit errors. This is Aristotle's well-known theory of *hamartia*, though this has not clearly distinguished between moral and intellectual errors. Great tragedies have resulted from both or either. But there are cases where tragedies have resulted from the noble deeds of the hero and not from his sins. According to the Aristotelian ethics, man's life can be happy and serene only when there is proper balance and symmetry, when life is restrained and moderate, and there is no overflow; there is *sophrosyne*. Naturally, even a noble action not in consonance with one's ability, may bring grief and misery.

This Western theory is obviously based on man's human quality, on his conception of human greatness. Man himself is responsible for his own misery. His grief is his own creation. In other words, man himself is his greatest enemy.

Such a conception, it may be pointed out, is akin to the Indian theory of *Karman*. Fate, according to the Indian view of life, is a product of man's own deeds; it is not externally produced. This theory of *Karman* has a complement in the Indian theory of re-birth. When, therefore, a pure and noble life is turned into misery, this cataclysm is explained as the effects of the deeds of a previous life. The West call it misfortune or accident, because it has emerged out of circumstances having hardly any relation to man's inner life, circumstances where man cannot play a part. Man here is helpless.

But whatever the explanations given by these different theories, the search for an answer to the mysteries of human life is never-ending. Man finds and also feels that there is an inevitable force, an unknown power which cannot be overcome. Man calls it Fate or Destiny.

Even though misery has been defined as self-created by the scientific-rational mind or literary theory, every literature has accepted the role of Destiny in its effort to explain the mysteries of human life. This essay attempts to establish such a proposition from a few dramas of both East and West.

Greek literature has assigned a special place to human greatness. Yet Destiny plays no small part in it. Homer praises and upholds human greatness; but nonetheless Destiny is significant in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Seemingly an angry god or goddess pre-determines everything. But does Destiny stay away? She glories in her revenge. She does not change: she is irresistible.

Now regarding the Greek dramas, especially prominent is the role of Destiny in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Truly speaking, Oedipus was guiltless, though he has been accused of pride. But he had to suffer for the faults of his father. He knew the curse and all through his life he had tried to avoid it. Indeed, he had been tireless in his efforts to stay away from the unnatural punishments reserved for him, the murder of his father and the marriage with his mother. He ran away from Corinth to avoid the disaster. Yet, in spite of all his efforts, Fate did her work. She made Oedipus murder his father and marry his mother. And thus emerged the repentant sinner with eyes blinded with his own hands.

How far, however, was Oedipus himself responsible for this guilt? Destiny had run after him all through his life. When his father had known that he himself would be murdered one day by his son, the young Oedipus was abandoned in the mountains with his feet fettered. But he was saved by Destiny only to suffer the final tragic end.

Sophocles' *Antigone* represents a similar play of Fate. Antigone, in burying her brother, incurred Creon's fury and lost her life. She and her brothers and sister—Oedipus' children, were born of Laius' wife—Oedipus' mother. They were thus born into a curse. Cursed, indeed, were their lives, predetermined by Destiny. Yet it is difficult to say that Antigone had done wrong. She had merely buried her brother and only too modestly. But, then, this meant an offence to Creon, the new king.)

The theme of the well-known allegorical tragedy *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus centres around the conflict between knowledge and power. While Prometheus stood for the former, Zeus represented the latter. Prometheus had brought knowledge for the benefit of humanity, he had given fire to man. But the furious Zeus took his revenge. He abandoned the chained Prometheus on the mountains from where he fell into the abyss. The theory of *hamartia* and the Aristotelian conception of ethics may very well explain Prometheus' tragic end. But is a noble deed meaningless? What would explain this? Prometheus might have sinned by pride, but the last lines of his song before he topples into the abyss run thus:

Hear now from chaos the cry begun:  
 "Behold Prometheus! on him alone  
 What acts of unrighteousness are done."



The Indian theory of re-birth, however, could put up a sort of an explanation for Prometheus' tragedy. He must have earned this in some previous birth. The good and noble deeds of his present life would be similarly rewarded in the future.

Prometheus was not at all repentant of his deeds. He had gathered knowledge for the benefit of the world. The flame he had stolen from the fiery wheel of Zeus' chariot had tremendously benefited humanity. But even this 'wise' Prometheus could not disown Destiny. This can be seen in the following dialogue:

First choric leader: Who then is the pilot of Necessity?

Prometheus: The Triple Fates and the avenging weirds.

Second leader: You mean the power of Zeus is less than theirs?

Prometheus: Yes, he may not infringe on what is written.

Fate is irresistible. Zeus himself is her bondsman.

After the Greek classics, we may now turn to the plays of the Elizabethan age, especially to Shakespeare. The Shakespearean dramas have an amazing similarity with the Sanskrit plays. Though the dramaturgy of the latter stands in conflict with the 'blood and thunder' tragedy of the Shakespearean type, in both, moral law dominates over poetic justice. Both sing the glories of virtue.

Shakespeare's tragedies, though dependent on their characters, nevertheless illustrate the determining influence of Fate. The witches in *Macbeth*, the coming of the ghost in *Hamlet*, the falling of the handkerchief in *Othello*—all these indicate the invisible hand of Fate. The witches may have been expressive of the high ambition of Macbeth, the ghost may symbolize the irresolution and melancholy of Hamlet, and the handkerchief episode may have been a mere accident in *Othello*. But all these are determined by Fate. Indeed, they represent the crucial turns of the respective dramas.

∴ (Sanskrit literature has not produced any tragedy. The explanation is simple. The Indian attitude towards life conflicts with the conception of tragedy itself. If the Sāṃkhya philosophy accepts misery, it also prescribes its cure. The Buddhist philosophy analyses the fundamental cause of misery as thirst; at the same time it gives the remedy. The Vedānta explains both happiness and misery in terms of illusion and asks man to rise above the opposition existing in the temporal world to a spiritual state. Against the background of these philosophies, no tragedy was formed in India. Misery had to be

garded as essentially transient, spread over only this life which is nothing but a passing shadow. (Could the misery of this life be the ultimate word in our eternal journey that spreads over many a life? Today's misery could very well be the product of yesterday's life or of one earlier; we do not know for certain. Life itself faces all its turns and reverses because of *Karman*. Some day the bonds of *Karman* and its consequences (that we call Fate) would end. And then the entry into the eternal land of bliss! Where then is tragedy in life?)

Let us take up two famous Sanskrit dramas, *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* and *Uttararāmacaritam*, for our discussion. Undeniably, there are good materials for tragedy in both these plays, though they end happily. 'Tragedy was imbued in Durvāsas' curse at the beginning of the fourth act of *Śakuntalā*, though foreshadowed even in the first act (*Daivamasyāhi pratikūlam śamayitum* etc.). In this very act, we find *Śakuntalā*, before her journey to her husband's home, speaking to her friends while noticing the frolic of the cakravāka couple: "Dear, behold, the mate is hidden by lotus leaves; and how the female cakravāka, not seeing her partner, shrieks! I am also taking up a difficult job." The allusion, needless to say, is to *Śakuntalā*'s coming reception by Duryodana. This is a sort of dramatic irony: one immediately gets a hint of the misfortune that is in store for *Śakuntalā*. The fifth act begins with Hastinapurikā's song which excites the apprehension of the reader for the nearing tragedy. A little later, *Śakuntalā* loses her only safeguard, her ring of recognition. Then comes the deadly refusal from all quarters, from her husband and also from her father through his disciples. Tragedy descends upon her unfortunate life. There is no shelter left for her in this wide world. The one she has accepted as her nearest does not acknowledge the marriage. The door of the loving home of her father, where her life has been so full of the love and affection of all and everything at the hermitage, is shut for ever. The Brahman priest can only offer a temporary shelter. And then comes the whirlwind of Fate. We know nothing of where she is carried to, we see nothing except the fitting picture of a luminous figure descending from heaven and watching her away towards the apocatastha. Then there is long silence between the fifth and sixth acts. Nothing in the entire world, no 'Tāgata' as beautifully puts it, is slowly mourning *Śakuntalā*'s tragedy. After a long time begins

the sixth act. Quite accidentally, Duryanta gets back the recognition-ring. And thus starts his heart-breaking repentance. How sad, how torturing! What could be a greater tragedy? No hope, no peace for that unfortunate king who has so far taken love as a mere sport. And to quote Oscar Wilde "But to suffer for one's own faults—ah! there is the sting of life." The reunion which is anticipated at the coming of Sānumatī in the sixth act, arrives at long last in the seventh. In the most natural and dignified way, Kālikāsa executes this glorious reunion. As Tagore says, paradise is regained and this is a paradise, achieved through the chastening influence of grief and penance.

The tragedy in *Charaṇāmāsa* begins from the very first act. Dark clouds have begun to gather even earlier. Rāma has ascended the throne after recovering his beloved wife. It is an oasis of love, of peace and happiness, after the long journey through the desert of a *divided kingdom*. But the thunder speaks. Aṣṭāvakra meets Rāma on his way back from the *gajā* of Kāśyapa. "What is the advice of my minister Aṣṭāvakra?" Rāma asks Aṣṭāvakra. "The greatest duty of the king is to please his subjects" — in Aṣṭāvakra's reply, "For the good of my subjects," Rāma takes the oath, "I shall even sacrifice my beloved Jānakī if it is necessary." Cruel Destiny smiles behind the back. Aṣṭāvakra blesses Rāma heartily and departs. Misfortune nears. Durmukha enters. Sītā who is then sound asleep cries out in a dream. After some hesitation Durmukha reports the popular feeling: the people are displeased by Rāma's accepting Sītā back. The vow made so unsuspectingly a moment ago becomes so cruel at the next. Rāma is stunned at the development of events, but he does not forget his solemn pledge. Sītā is banished. It is so tragic, so sudden! Then starts the heart-rending pathos which permeates almost the whole drama which, however, ends happily.

Fate plays, no doubt, a determining part in both these Sanskrit plays. The smooth and simple course of events from the first to the third act of *Śakuntalā* is abruptly twisted in the fourth act by Durvāsa's curse. The reason behind this curse was Śakuntalā's failure in welcoming a guest because she was lost in thoughts about her husband. The deadly curse, as some have asserted, might have been a punishment for Śakuntalā's neglect of duty—the duty of hospitality which was her special charge during Kanva's absence from the hermitage. But was not the arrival of Durvāsa on that day of all days

seemingly arranged by some external force, let us say, by Fate?

Then, again, Śakuntalā dropped her ring of recognition, her only safeguard. It had not been lost during all the previous months: why now? Did this happen only to give effect to the curse of an all-knowing sage? Or was it a play of Fate? //

In *Uttararāmacaritam* also, Fate intervenes in the midst of Rāma-candra's blooming happiness. Aṣṭāvakra appears just when Durmukha is due to come to Rāma, as if it has all been arranged beforehand. And Durmukha has to describe the feeling of the people just a little after Rāma has made the fateful vow. Here also Fate very cleverly and cruelly does her work.

The Fate of the Sanskrit dramas is essentially different from that of the Western dramas. In the former, Fate is man's own creation. But in the Greek or Elizabethan drama, it is an external power, a separate force. That is why there is hardly any check upon Fate in the Western dramas. It is irresistible: nothing can stop her bringing disaster and misery. In the Sanskrit drama, however, the tragedy is essentially temporary, it does end. A bad action, according to the Indian or rather Hindu view of life, can be negated by a good one. So Rāma and Sitā, Duryanta and Śakuntalā, can be reunited and reconciled.

The ideal of Indian life is peace and tranquillity and a belief in the 'rational order of the world.' Indian aesthetics has been characterized by this. Consequently, Sanskrit literature has always aimed at upholding this particular attitude to life. To quote Dr Raghavan, "The object of Drama, according to Indian aesthetics, is (thus) not to add to man's confusion by posing fresh problems but to help him transcend the turmoil and attain composure."

CREATION AND CONTRIVANCE : DRYDEN'S  
ADAPTATION OF *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*  
SET AGAINST THE BACKGROUND  
OF HIS AGE

DAVID MCCUTCHION

He thought that if his characters were good,  
The scenes entire, and freed from noise and blood,  
The action great, yet circumscribed by time,  
The words not forced, but sliding into rhyme,  
The passions raised and calmed by just degrees,  
As tides are swelled, and then retire to seas;  
He thought, in hitting these, his business done, . . .  
—Epilogue to *Aureng-Zebe*

DRYDEN admired Shakespeare for "the largest and most comprehensive soul" and compared him with the greatest of mankind. In championing him above the ancients and the French, Dryden above all emphasised Shakespeare's power of original creation—he needed no ancients to guide him, he was a law unto himself:

All the images of nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously but luckily; when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards and found her there.<sup>1</sup>

Dryden extolled the English stage above the French because its plots were "fuller of variety," its writing "fuller of spirit." He commended "the variety and greatness of characters which are derived to us from Shakespeare and Fletcher: the copiousness and well-knitting of the intrigues we have from Jonson." And even though English plays may be less regular, they make up for this in masculine fancy. Yet when, ten years later, Dryden turned directly to imitate his "divine Shakespeare," we find it is precisely the spirit, the variety, the masculinity, which he could not imitate. French classicism had

<sup>1</sup> *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, 1668

triumphed: nature was no longer to be found within. In understanding why Dryden, professing to imitate Shakespeare, was nearer to imitating Corneille, we shall understand both the compulsions of his age and the inevitable reaction against them. For how is it possible that the most gifted poet of his time, who wrote the finest political satire in English literature, and whose couplet has a strength and assurance unparalleled by any other poet, should fail so pitifully when he tried to write a serious play?

It is not easy to disentangle the often contradictory effects of what is known for convenience as the Renaissance, and the Copernican revolution which grew out of it, but one broad feature may be clearly defined: *the primacy of authority was replaced by experiment*, an age of investigation succeeded an age of faith. Scholasticism had used reason to support revelation: for, as Aquinas declared, "since faith rests on infallible truth, its contrary cannot be demonstrated; manifestly the proofs which are brought against it are not proofs, but controvertible arguments." Nevertheless, by bringing in reason to support faith, Scholasticism prepared for the free use of reason to interpret appearances, when new instruments revealed a world unknown:

That the *Galaxy* is a *Meteor*, was the account of *Aristotle*:  
But the *Telescope* hath autoptically confused it: And he, who  
is not a *Pyrrhonian* to the disbelief of his Senses, may see, that  
it's no exhalation from the earth, but a heap of smaller *Luminaries*.  
That the *Heavens* are void of *corruption*, is *Aristotle's*  
supposal: But the *Tube* hath betrayed their impurity: and  
*Neoterick Astronomy* hath found *spots* in the *Sun*.<sup>2</sup>

Such discoveries, and the urge to account for them, imposed the famous inductive method defined by Bacon, systematised by *Locke* and confirmed as the scientific method: to derive axioms from the senses and particulars and not to explain phenomena from settled and immovable axioms. Empirical analysis replaced a priori reasoning.

But if the primacy of observation and experiment was established for the natural sciences, the same could not be said for literature. The Renaissance, which had rediscovered Pythagoras for the phar-

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Glanvill: *Scopis Scientifica*, 1665

ophers, had unearthed Aristotle's *Poetics*<sup>3</sup> for the theorists of the newly-emergent national literatures. The result, abetted by Horace, was a spate of dogmatising: Vida, Scaliger, Sidney, Boileau, Gottsched, Pope. Art is an imitation of nature, so the supernatural must be excluded (no dolphins living in the woods); the literary *genres* are clearly differentiated and must be kept separate; form, especially versification, must be regular; tragedy must deal with heroes above the stature of ordinary men and strictly adhere to the unities; and so on, down to the smallest detail. Thus for more than two centuries, literary theory (not at first practice) came to be dominated by a systematic reasoning as a priori as Scholasticism, with the *Poetics* as revelation:

Still green with bays each ancient Altar stands,  
Above the reach of sacrilegious hands;  
Secure from Flames, from Envy's fiercer rage,  
Destructive War, and all-involving Age.  
See from each clime the learn'd their incense bring!  
Hear, in all tongues consenting Paeans ring!  
In praise so just let ev'ry voice be join'd.  
And fill the gen'ral chorus of mankind.<sup>4</sup>

Yet this desire for order and harmony, this preoccupation with rules as the key to art, this concern with form as something exterior to content, may also be linked directly with the triumph of Newton and Locke. The revival of humanism, preferring Pythagoras to Aristotle, had renewed emphasis on the numerical structure of the world, so that a mathematical theory of the beautiful evolved. The guarantee of perfection in art was to imitate the harmony of natural forces. The audible consonance of the Pythagorean intervals in music became the criterion for visual consonance in architecture. A basilica and a man were shown to have the same proportions: head to body, choir to nave. Sculptors and painters carried over into art Galileo's view of the universe:

It is written in mathematical language, and the letters are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures, without which means it is humanly impossible to understand a single word.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> First complete Latin translation: 1498; first Greek text: 1508

<sup>4</sup> Pope: *Essay on Criticism*, 1711

<sup>5</sup> Galileo: *Il Saggiatore*

From this derives mainly the increasing concern with structure and proportion which culminates in the perfection of French classicism. Thus in Dryden's *Essay*, Eugenius emphasises the extent to which the moderns have improved on the ancient models: "For if natural causes be more known now than in the time of Aristotle, because more studied, it follows that poesy and other arts may with the same pains arrive still nearer to perfection." Both Eugenides and Lisideus (for the French) are finally discredited, yet in Dryden's own heroic plays, the strict care for logical structure is perhaps their chief merit.

In 1687 the *Principia Mathematica* finally revealed the universe as a machine—a system of ordered relationships in which the three laws of motion plus universal gravitation accounted for the movements of all bodies. But once discovered, the determining principles of nature might also be used by man to modify nature for his own purposes. Bacon had defined Natural Philosophy as "Inquiry of Causes and Production of Effects" (my italics), thereby foreshadowing all modern technology. In the same way the literary theorists sought to discover the laws of poetry in order to use them to create their own poetry (thereby to rival their neighbours, and the ancients themselves)—a mechanistic view indeed! Moreover Leibnitz with his famous "calculemus", had desired that all discussion might be reduced to mathematical exactitude,

if we could find characters and signs appropriate to the expression of all our thoughts as definitely and as exactly as numbers are expressed by arithmetic . . . And if someone doubted my results, I should say to him, 'Let us calculate, Sir,' and so by taking pen and ink we should soon settle the question.'

Indeed it has been suggested that the poetic diction of the eighteenth century was an attempt to discover a language of poetry as 'exact' as that of prose—'heightened' equivalents of ordinary speech to express 'poetic' thought.

Evidently such a climate was not favourable to poetry, the meaning of which cannot be reduced to logical clarity. The great concern of the seventeenth century was the sorting out of truth and falsehood—the "exaltation" of truth, as Bacon had it. Ideas are only real when they correspond to the actual world—all the old superstitious

'Leibnitz: *On Method*, 1677



the belief in witches, omens and monsters, must be pushed aside. Sir Thomas Browne solemnly establishes that the Phoenix cannot engender itself and that barnacle geese do not grow on trees. But what was the source of all such nonsense? Imagination and ignorance – the same forces that had released the wild extravagances of religious enthusiasm in the previous century. So in this business of “clearing the ground a little and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge,” the imagination must be put under severe restraint. Words are to be used precisely and not frivolously, ideas will be clear and rational, and the mind must move in a “steady direction to some approved end.” For thought is now come of age, and imagination is the faculty of children. These preoccupations are reflected in the “constant Resolution” of the Royal Society, as we find in Thomas Sprat’s *History*,

to reject all the amplifications, digressions and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when *men* delivered so many *things*, almost in an equal number of *words* . . . They have extracted from all their members, a close, naked natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness; bringing all things so near the Mathematical plainness as they can.

Locke elevated ‘judgement’ (which analyses and distinguishes ideas) over ‘wit’ (i.e., the poetic faculty, which unites by resemblances): poetry was good for little else but “pleasant pictures and agreeable visions.” Poetry was relegated to the realm of ‘fancy’: “a kind of ingenious nonsense” (Newton). The result of all this was, as Basil Willey has so convincingly demonstrated, that “poets were inevitably writing with the sense that their constructions were *not true*, and this feeling robbed their work of essential seriousness.”<sup>8</sup> Poetry was no longer dictated by personal emotion, as in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. Instead poets turned their verse to the service of political satire or philosophical argument. Panegyrics, elegies, prologues and victory odes all flourished mightily, together with soft Dedication all day long. Poetry became a social game, one of Lord Chesterfield’s graces,<sup>9</sup> a matter of formal excellence, like good breeding. It was no part of the poet’s function to seek for truth; he should merely dress up the

<sup>8</sup> Locke: *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 1690

<sup>9</sup> Basil Willey: *The Seventeenth Century Background*

accepted ideas of his day—not reveal, but express. Thus when Dryden wrote *Religio Laici*, he made no attempt to work out his ideas through the poetry, as Donne in his *Satyre on Religion*, but simply put into verse the conclusions he had already come to:

And this unpolished, rugged verse I chose,  
As fittest for discourse and nearest prose.

At its best such poetry, unadorned with the later accretions of poetic diction, had great qualities—clarity, wit and pointedness, above all a supremely civilised mastery of tone—but it remained essentially “the poetry of the builders of an age of prose and reason.” It “expressed” nothing that had not first been “thought”—at least, it aspired no further.

The belief that the difference between poetry and prose was a matter of form only may be associated with the work of the sixteenth century French logician Peter Ramus, who separated dialectic and rhetoric, so that the logical process of thought (investigation) came to be considered distinct from the manner in which it was communicated (presentation). The movement of the age, analytical and detached, resulted in the famous “dissociation of sensibility,” whereby poets were no longer identified immediately with the concrete situation giving rise to their thought: the pattern was pre-conceived. In T. S. Eliot’s words: “they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose.” Inevitably, poetry became a matter of rules, and the new ideal ‘correctness’:

About fifteen, I got acquainted with Mr. Walsh. He used to encourage me much, and used to tell me, that there was one way left of excelling: for though we had several great poets, we never had any one great poet that was correct: and he desired me to make that my study and aim.

—so Pope records of his own development. The Augustans seem to have had little notion of the indivisibility of form and content. They took the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and other “barbarian” writers, and rewrote them to the standards of “this refined age.” But marble is not invariably an improvement on brick. To cut and polish the *Satyres* of Donne, as Pope did, replacing the bewildered aggressiveness of the originals with his own pointed brilliance, is to

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create an entirely new work as shining as it may be disappointing—Donne disguised as Pope. Nevertheless, a great deal of the best Augustan poetry did rise above the seventeenth century dichotomy of idea and image, thought and feeling, as in Dryden's famous description of Shaftesbury:

A fiery soul, which working out its way,  
Fretted the pigmy-body to decay,  
And o'er-informed the tenement of clay.<sup>9</sup>

But this could only happen when the permitted form was appropriate to the content. There is no Augustan love poetry—only Dryden's songs!

There is a touching perversity in the dilemma of these moderns seeking the principles of art in nature, yet not knowing where to look, and falling back on the ancients:

Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem  
To copy nature is to copy them.<sup>10</sup>

Advice was much nearer home:

Thus great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,  
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,  
'Fool' said my muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write.'<sup>11</sup>

For Sidney came too early, in the flush of Elizabethan creativity, to be bound by any rigid application of poetic theory. His *mimesis* is still "a speaking picture," and the poet

disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature ...<sup>12</sup>

But within a century the pictures ceased to speak, while "the heroes, demi-gods, cyclops and chimeras" were relegated to fairyland.

<sup>9</sup> Dryden: *Absalom and Achitophel*, 1681

<sup>10</sup> Pope: *Essay on Criticism*, 1711

<sup>11</sup> Sidney: *Astrophel and Stella*, 1591

<sup>12</sup> Sidney: *Defence of Poesie*, 1595

The principle which the moderns overlooked in their determination to "follow nature," was the working of the creative imagination—both in author and audience. They applied the theories in the literal spirit of the age—often with absurd results. The unities of time and place, supposed to have been derived from Aristotle, assume that the mind of the audience cannot transcend the physical limitations of actual time and space—a matter for scene-shifters only, as Aristotle points out, who knew that Greek dramas came thrice a day, with a satyric play to follow. The action of a Shakespeare play takes place not on the stage, with its crude board announcing "Philippi", but in the imagination of the audience, *transported* by the poetry. The logic of art is not the logic of geometry. God had let Newton be, and "all was light", but the heart remained as dark as it had always been, and now men shunned to look there.

Furthermore, after the Restoration of 1660, literature centred on the court, newly returned from the refinement and elegance of Versailles. New standards of propriety were called for. The audience was no longer prepared to be carried away by the imagination: it came to criticise. There could be no attempt at dramatic illusion. Performances were demonstrations rather than plays, with the roles distributed among symbols representing absolute values, working out such established theorems as love versus duty, or the weak father favouring his wicked son in preference to his virtuous son. Decorum was strict: "Poetical decency will not suffer death to be dealt to each other by such persons whom the laws of duels allow not to enter the lists together." Serious drama had to be elevating and portray an ideal action: "the work of an heroic poem is to raise admiration principally for three virtues, valour, beauty and love" (Hobbes). Room enough for reality in Restoration Comedy. Kings and destiny were the unalloyed subject matter, and all indecency was purged away: "A play should show one great and absolute pattern of honour" (Dryden).

Clearly, such productions, for all the "verisimilitude" of the unities, could not be considered an imitation of nature as prevailing at the court of Charles II. A distinction was made between nature as she is, and nature as she ought to be. Art came to be seen as an improvement on nature, which is struggling imperfectly to realise herself: "True art is nature to advantage dress'd." In this way the notion of "poetic justice" was developed—a term coined by Dryden in his

Preface to *Troilus and Cressida*, where he complains of Shakespeare's version in which "the chief persons, who give name to the tragedy, are left alive: Cressida is false and is not punished." He puts this right in an own version: Cressida ~~was~~ *betrayed*, Troilus kills Diomedes, and Achilles kills Troilus. For the moral law is natural law "the authority of nature was necessary to replace that of revelation, and we should embody that law. Such confidence destroyed the tragic sense: Cordelia must marry Edgar (Nathum Tate). Thus arose the paradox of a period in which English literature was more consciously artificial than at any other time, yet most insistently claimed to 'follow nature.'"

Such, in brief, were the forces operating on Dryden when he came to make his adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra*. His play did not arise from any inner compulsion: he chose it "for the excellency of the moral." He is neither identified with his subject matter, nor living through his characters. He apportions them just so much of good and bad as necessary:

All reasonable men have long since concluded that the hero of the poem ought not be a character of perfect virtue, for then he could not, without injustice, be unhappy; nor yet altogether wicked, because he could not then be pitied. I have therefore steered the middle course . . .<sup>13</sup>

He is worried about the exact manipulation of his audience's sympathies: will the arrival of Octavia and her children take away some of that compassion which he had "reserved for Antony and Cleopatra; whose mutual love being founded upon vice, must lessen the favour of the audience to them, when virtue and innocence were oppressed by it." The result of such rationalisation is a drastic narrowing of awareness (thoughts are less complicated than feelings), and consequent simplification of psychology. To us his Octavia may seem a virtuous prig.

The scheme of values in Shakespeare's play is entirely different. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a glorification of physical passion in all its reality, futility, and contradiction to the demands of society; death is not its punishment, but its apotheosis. For the Augustans such

<sup>13</sup> Dryden: Preface to *All for Love*, 1678

It was yet another manifestation of those disruptive and irrational forces which perpetually threaten the sensible ordering of men's affairs. Along with God and the gout, it was to be kept out of sight of the "minde," as Lord Chesterfield said, "is ridiculous." Dryden has more sympathy for "the crimes of love," which "were not to be cured by any necessity, or fatal separation, but were only to be cured by the Stage-play, which has no meaning if not true."

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch  
Of the rang'd Empire fall: here is my space,  
Kingdoms are clay: our dusty earth alike  
Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life  
Is to do thus: when such a mutual pair,  
And such a twain can do't, in which I bind  
On pain of punishment, the world to meet  
We stand up peerless.

(I/i)

There is no other value—irrespective of Enobarbus' cynicism, Cleopatra's fickleness, the claims of Rome or marriage. When Antony turns off Octavia, a moral judgement is no more to be made against him, than when he relinquishes the world for Cleopatra: their passion is its own justification—political and moral issues are irrelevant. Throughout, the cosmic imagery of sun, moon and stars insists on the irrelevance of this petty earth:

Eternity was in our lips, and eyes,  
Bliss in our brows' bent . . .

The common world, that only sees a "strumpet's fool" and a "gipsy's lust", has missed the whole point of being alive. The coldness of Caesar (administrative efficiency) and the dullness of Octavia (domestic responsibility) contrast with the magnanimity of Antony and the spiritedness of Cleopatra. The world of politics is contemptuously dismissed by the carousal on Pompey's barge, when "the third part of the world, man" is carried out drunk.

For Dryden such romantic extravagance is absurd, and he weights our sympathies entirely on the other side—with Ventidius, with Octavia, and with Antony's "true self". Social values replace individual values. The characters are enervated. Shakespeare's Antony is nothing if not masculine—a thundering, impetuous old campaigner, sword-happy yet good-natured, ready at any time to broach a wine cask,

gazing one moment, then outstaring the lightning. But when we first see him in *All for Love*, he is wrapped up in self-pity because he lost the battle of Actium, refusing to speak to anyone. He throws himself down like a moody adolescent, and demands soft music:

stay, I fancy  
I'm now turn'd wild, a commoner of nature;  
Of all forsaken, and forsaking all;  
Live in a shady forest's sylvan scene,  
Stretched at my length beneath some blasted oak,  
I lean my head against the mossy bark ... (I/i)

Retreat into Arcadia! Dryden's Antony is too easily "unmanned": Octavia's children move him to tears. Cleopatra wins him over with sentimental trifling—he will wear her bracelet on the battlefield:

'Twill pass the wakeful hours of winter nights,  
To tell these pretty beads upon my arm ... (II/i)

He is effeminised—pitiful, childish with dismay, when he considers himself betrayed:

O Cleopatra!  
O Dolabella! how could you betray  
This tender heart, which with an infant fondness  
Lay lulled betwixt your bosoms, and there slept,  
Secure of injured faith? (IV/i)

What has become of the Antony that had the messenger whipped that dared kiss Cleopatra's hand, and rounded on his mistress in a fury:

I found you as a morsel, cold upon  
Dead Caesar's trencher: nay, you were a' fragment  
Of Gneius Pompey's, besides what hotter hours ... (III/xiii)

But Dryden's Antony has a "plain honest heart" and his "whole life: Has been a golden dream of love and friendship" (V/i).

Cleopatra undergoes the same transformation. Shakespeare's portrait is literally "unparallel'd" for the complexity of response it calls forth. Never has the divergence of the vital and the moral been more convincingly demonstrated. Morally, we condemn Cleopatra: she is cruel, self-centred, wilful, opportunist, deceitful, and would change the "declining" Antony for Caesar if she could. Yet for all that

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she retains our sympathies—not only as a defeated human being  
“Sir, you and I must part, but that’s not it . . .” . . . not only because  
she transcends the fate which is forced upon her, but because she is  
so much and at every moment, through all the variety of her con-  
tradictory moods, *alive*. She is the incarnation of primal energies  
demanding instant satisfaction on their own terms:

I saw her once  
Hop forty paces through the public street,  
And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted,  
That she did make defect perfection,  
And breathless power breathe forth. (II ii)

Dryden has changed all this. His Cleopatra is a would-be Octavia:

Nature meant me  
A wife; a silly, harmless, household dove,  
Fond without art, and kind without deceit . . . (IV/i)

This is improving nature with a vengeance! It is hard to know what  
to make of this pleading child that has no other argument but  
‘sincerity’:

You leave me Antony; and yet I love you,  
Indeed I do . . . (II/i)

This Cleopatra does not cast about to the very end in schemes to  
avoid captivity, but rejects with contempt the suggestion of Alexas  
that she should betray Antony to Caesar. She has become a Roman:  
incapable of dissimulation when called upon to play an ambiguous  
role with Dolabella. It is significant that at death, where Shakes-  
peare’s Cleopatra finally sheds her earthly disguises:

Husband I come  
Now to that name my courage prove my title.  
I am fire and air; my other elements  
I give to baser life. (V/ii)

Dryden’s merely succeeds in being stiff:

I have not loved a Roman, not to know  
What should become his wife; his wife, my Charmian! (V/i)  
For ’tis to that high title I aspire . . .



For Dryden, in spite of his title, not love, but honour is the motivating value, and whereas Shakespeare's royal pair consummate their passion by death in defiance of the world, Dryden's Antony and Cleopatra retreat into a final dignity.

We find therefore a conflict between Shakespeare's content and Dryden's form, which is not entirely resolved by the shift in emphasis from love to honour. In endeavouring "to follow the practice of the ancients, who, as Mr. Rymer has judiciously observed, are and ought to be our masters," Dryden has imposed upon a drama of passion and energy the rigorous confinement of his own logical mind. All the wild exuberance of Shakespeare's play, its panoramic ranging in space and time, its infinite variety of mood and behaviour, its boundless energy and immortal longings, are reduced by Dryden to a neat schema, "since our passions are, or ought to be, within our power." The action is compressed to within a single day, beginning some time after the battle of Actium. Antony is roused from misery to make his last victorious sally, followed in quick succession by his reconciliation with Octavia, his alienation from both Cleopatra and Octavia, the defection of the fleet, Cleopatra's feigned death, Antony's death and Cleopatra's death. Poor Antony is not even allowed "one other gaudy night" of triumph. The unities, as Dryden himself remarks, are "more exactly observed, than perhaps the English theatre requires." All irrelevant characters and episodes have been eliminated—no Pompey, no Lepidus, no Enobarbus. The *dramatis personae* are cut from thirty-six to twelve.

Many omissions are due, not so much to the cherished unities, as to propriety. French precept had taught Dryden that there could be no question of representing the boisterous feast on Pompey's galley. The blasphemy and bawdiness of the scene with Alexas and the soothsayer ("Oh let him marry a woman that cannot go, sweet Isis, I beseech thee . . ."), the bad taste of Cleopatra's jesting with her eunuch, the blunt directness with which Caesar and the world refer to Antony's "tumbling on the bed of Ptolemy"—all this is thoroughly expurgated and latinized:

Oh, she has decked her ruin with her love,  
Lest lost in golden branches to gaudy slaughter,  
And made perdition pleasing . . . (11)

*Pompey:* "Such scenes, though natural, are not fit to be represented."

and broad obscenities in words ought in good manners to be avoided." Similarly, the long-drawn parleying of Cleopatra with Caesar and his henchmen in the last act, must be cut out as detracting from those minimum standards of honour without which, Dryden believed, the audience could feel none of the necessary pity he wished to arrange for her.

If the energy is withdrawn from the treatment, it is hard to believe the characters ever had any. Nevertheless, considered for its own sake, the structure of *All for Love* is its most satisfactory achievement. Here Dryden's orderly classifying mind comes into its own. The keynote is logical clarity, and the central issue is never obscured: love versus honour:

And I will leave her; though Heaven knows, I love  
Beyond life, conquest, empire, all but honour. (I/i)

Antony is the centre round which the entire action turns, and each act centres on one particular phase of his conflict:

- Act I : Ventidius wins over Antony.
- Act II : Cleopatra wins over Antony.
- Act III : Octavia wins over Antony.
- Act IV : Antony is alienated from Cleopatra, Octavia  
and Ventidius.
- Act V : Reconciliation in death.

Both as a whole and within the acts, the play is constructed architecturally—a sequence of emotions in blocks. For each situation the audience is in no doubt about the issues, and as they are resolved, some new development prepares a new conflict. In Act III for instance, the tension is kept particularly high: Antony's flush of victory is undermined by Ventidius' realism, followed by the memories and reproaches of reunion with Dolabella, leading abruptly to the calculated shock of Octavia's appearance. Now Egypt must scheme to win Antony back (for each development produces its reactions), but first Dryden must confront Cleopatra with Octavia—lawful and unlawful love, duty and irresponsibility: the antithesis is irresistible, the central pivot of the play.

Although the situations are ostensibly emotional, they are highly charged not with feeling, but with argument: the play proceeds like

a debate. The interest of the audience is concentrated on *reasons* which support either side—the rival claims of Ventidius, Octavia and Cleopatra on Antony's loyalty. At every stage the audience must be in full possession of the necessary facts for lucid judgement. For instance, the threads of Act IV, which risk being complicated, are briefly disentangled: (1) Antony still loves Cleopatra; (2) Dolabella will seek to replace him; (3) Ventidius will take advantage of the situation to rouse Antony's hatred of Cleopatra; (4) Alexas advises Cleopatra to work up Antony's jealousy. All very convincing. But any such clarity of motivation was impossible in Shakespeare's play, which worked through impulsive actions and ambiguous emotions—as in real life.

It would seem that the more an author strives to be natural, the less he is likely to succeed. The more he plans according to preconceived notions of how his characters are likely to proceed in given situations, the less convincing they become. He has deprived them of their *freedom*: they are no longer human. Dryden "judged it both natural and probable, that Octavia, proud of her new-gained conquest, would search out Cleopatra to triumph over her." But this probability should be a certainty, arising out of the impetus of her personality in the immediate situation, something felt as inevitable by author and audience, through participation. A matter not to judge, but recognise. Every action of Shakespeare's Cleopatra convinces through this feeling of 'rightness'—she behaves perfectly 'in character,' to the extent that some of her actions, unpredictable, may surprise us, but we nevertheless recognise (with delight) that they are completely true to her being, which we have not logically analysed, but intuitively grasped. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth century it was not the drama or poem that could achieve this immediate expression of lived reality—but the novel. Defoe effects the same kind of identification with Moll Flanders as Shakespeare with Cleopatra, so that Moll's assumption of gentility in her dealings with the boat-swain when she is being packed off to Jamaica on reprieve from the gallows, carries the same startling conviction of 'truth to life' as Cleopatra's attempt to give a false inventory of her possessions to the triumphant Caesar. Here then is the source of that psychological unreality that so pervades *All for Love*—Dryden's play is not one, but two stages removed from experience (a play about reflexion on somebody else's experience), and the "spirit" that he so admired and

so failed to imitate from Shakespeare, is precisely the spirit of lived experience, which cannot be imitated. For this reason he failed to realise the discrepancy between his puny figures and the great deeds attributed to them. Is this schoolboy the conqueror of half the world, and this blushing coquette the woman for whom he threw it all away? Finally, the unreality explains the sentimentality: Antony and Cleopatra have been transported into the tender world of wish-fulfilment which complemented the cynicism of Restoration comedy.

All this is borne out by the language. In Shakespeare idea and image are fused; the metaphors, drawn from a total complex of associated experience, are integral and exploratory, determining the thought in the act of expressing it:

For his bounty,  
There was no winter in't. An Antony it was,  
That grew the more by reaping: his delights  
Were dolphin-like, they showed his back above  
The element they lived in ... (V/ii)

But in Dryden the imagery is conventional and vague, not concretely felt:

Virtue's his path; but sometimes 'tis too narrow  
For his vast soul; and then he starts out wide,  
And bounds into a vice, that bears him far  
From his first course, and plunges him in ills. (I/i)

(Bounding *into* a vice that *bears* him away?) Dryden's images merely support his idea. They may be commonplace to the point of ordinary speech, mere intensifiers:

Oh, thou hast fired me; my soul's up in arms  
And man's each part about me: Once again  
That noble eagerness of fight has seized me;  
That eagerness with which I darted upward  
To Cassius' camp ... (I/i)

The "clear senses" of the Royal Society could never permit the richness of Shakespeare's puns:

Oh wither'd is the garland of the war,  
The soldier's pole is fall'n ... (IV/xv)

When Shakespeare's Antony is in a rage, his mind casts about in anguish for images to capture his conflicting emotions:

The hearts  
That spaniel'd me at heels, to whom I gave  
Their wishes, do discandy, melt their sweets  
On blossoming Caesar: and this pine is barked  
That overtopp'd them all ... (IV/xii)

He is in a murderous rage ("Triple-turn'd whore, 'tis thou/Hast sold me to this novice ..."), and Cleopatra flees for her life. But Dryden's Antony, confronting Cleopatra and Dolabella, can only deliver speeches:

but avoid me:  
I do not know how long I can be tame;  
For, if I stay one minute more, to think  
How I am wronged, my justice and revenge  
Will cry so loud within me, that my pity  
Will not be heard for either. (IV/i)

Shakespeare's images arise everywhere from the most direct expression of concrete experience—the elemental quality of:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety: other women cloy  
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies. For vilest things  
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests  
Bless her, when she is riggish. (II/ü)

Dryden makes two attempts to retain this, each time 'poeticising'—through Antony:

There's no satiety of love in thee:  
Enjoyed, thou still art new; perpetual spring  
Is in thy arms; the ripened fruit but falls,  
And blossoms rise to fill its empty place. (III/i)

And through Ventidius:

Age buds at sight of her, and swells to youth:  
The holy priests gaze on her when she smiles;

And with heaved hands, forgetting gravity,  
They bless her wanton eyes.

(IV/i)

Elaboration, latinisation, smoothness and balance, 'poetic' imagery, abstraction: the secret of immediacy is lost. Everywhere argument and rhetoric have replaced feeling. The simplicity with which Shakespeare's Antony receives the news of Cleopatra's death:

Unarm Eros, the long day's task is done,  
And we must sleep ...

(IV/xiv)

is not expressive enough for Dryden. His Antony must ratiocinate:

Hadst thou been false, and died, or hadst thou lived,  
And hadst been true---But innocence and death!  
This shows not well above ...

(V i)

Enough has been said: the evidence lies in every speech to reveal two entirely different modes of thought—the one as immediate as the odour of a rose, the other reflective, the product of that dissociation of sensibility from which Mr. Eliot believed English poetry had still not recovered in 1921. It may be doubted whether the division is so clear-cut, or whether poetic immediacy is so simple a matter as this implies. In any case writers were not slow to rebel against the a priori formalism instituted by classicism. The Baconian revolution in literature whereby the sacred authority of the classical rules was questioned and the laws of creation sought rather in the imagination itself, may be said to have begun in Germany during the first half of the eighteenth century with the dispute between Gottsched and his Swiss critics Bodmer and Breitinger. Gottsched's *Critical Poetics* had summed up classical theory for the Germans in 1730. Like his French and English counterparts, he conceived poetry from the outside—master the principles and the rest will follow; first choose your moral thesis, then contrive an action to illustrate it. But Bodmer, in his Preface to Breitinger's *Critical Poetics* of 1739, asks which came first: nature or art? and asserts that "the best writings did not arise from the rules, but on the contrary, the rules were taken from the writings." Thus the Swiss critics established the primacy of the work over the rules, and so prepared the way for original creation in Germany. So too in England the dominance of reason over literature steadily

waned, until that nature which the Augustans had sought to imitate from the ancients, was found by the Romantics in the Lake District. Then only could Wordsworth write of Dryden:

... there is not a single image from Nature in the whole body of his works; and in his translation from Virgil, whenever Virgil can be fairly said to have his eye upon his object, Dryden always spoils the passage.<sup>1</sup>

*But this was taking it a bit too far...*

## RABINDRANATH IN THE WEST

NARESH GUHA

RABINDRANATH has become an enigma as the East always has been to the West. He is all the more so as the East finds him equally intractable. Many of his countrymen regard him simply as a sage, which does not have very much to do with his life's work as a poet.

work of great variety, and range and depth of perception. After the initial distrust of and persistent embarrassment with the unaccustomed utter transformation of Bengali language and literature, many decided to find consolation in his rather early conception of *Jivandevata* (Lord of life) which, as good-natured readers supposed, constitutes the essence of his poetry.

This concern with a very personal Lord of life signifies at best only one strand, perhaps an important strand, in the development of his poetic personality, and indicates the seriousness with which he viewed his work. "When the *Jivandevata* idea came to me," he says in a recorded conversation with Edward Thompson, "I felt an overwhelming joy— it seemed a discovery, new with me— in this deepest self-seeking expression. I wished to sink into it, to give myself up wholly to it," and then he adds with his characteristic humour, mixed with irony and paradox, "today (i.e. in 1922) I am on the same plane as my readers, and I am trying to find out what the *Jivandevata* was." But a legend in the meantime had been created, and though public memory is notoriously short, legends die hard.

To this add the hundreds of songs which he composed and which have been in use during Bramho services for more than three quarters of a century, his connection with the Bramho Samaj, his dignified, aloof, saintly presence, and his choice in later years of a long loose robe—actually for his personal convenience—as his formal garment,—and one begins to realise some of the apparent reasons why he has been labelled primarily as a religious poet and a wise man from the East.

A wise man from the East was indeed what many people in the West had been searching the horizon for— for one had raised more this vague hope among many Christians than that talented Russian Madame, an immigrant in America, who had worked out in the early



seventies of the last century a fascinating eclectic cult of occultism with her mysterious and invisible Tibetan Masters—Kut Humi and others, drawing so much from medieval Indian esoteric systems. Her invisible Immortals were so versatile and obliging that for the benefit of her sceptical British friends they were as eager to supply additional bone china tea cups matching a rare set already in their possession as to compose regular long persuasive letters in elegant English mysteriously sent to dispel doubts in the mind of A. P. Sinnett—a respectable British journalist—then living in India. Theosophy became a most exciting innovation in London and Dublin as well as in America of the early nineties. W. B. Yeats with all his secret doubts and questions in mind was destined to become a serious disciple of the inscrutable Madame. Dublin Lodge was agog with esoteric activities, so much so that with all apparent innocence the sceptical young Joyce suggested once to good-natured A. E. that Ireland was ready for the birth of an *avatar*. Mohini Chatterjee, an impressive Bengali Brahmin disciple of H. P., canonized later in Yeats's poem, visited and lectured in Dublin. Attending seances became an edifying ritual, and among those who visited in Yeats's company these occult exhibitions were Sturge Moore and Ezra Pound. And then how can one forget the great enthusiasm created in America on the visit of that eminent, young, handsome Hindu revivalist, Swami Vivekananda? Expectant minds, it can be safely surmised, were anxious to receive further affirmation of the living spiritual tradition in the Orient. Those who were rather ill at ease with occult practices waited for some modern version of the same spirit, without however the ritual part of it.

Yeats wrote in 1908, four years before he came to know Rabindranath, : "...Christianity revolted against the nature worship of the heathen, and gradually as Christianity completed itself, and especially when the Paradise set in Nature's place began to fade, set the mind of man apart like a pebble where nothing is reflected, a hard and abstract thing, with nature for tempter or breaker... What painters and poets (of the Renaissance) who rediscovered landscape, joyous movement, the voluptuous body, began, the astrologer ... and the spiritist and the student of Eastern contemplation are carrying into the very depths of the soul, restoring to us the meaning of tonight's mystery...."

No one could ignore the vital presence of this Irish poet with all

his erratic interests in London literary circles. Rothenstein, however, does not seem, as one gathers from his well-documented three-volume autobiography, to have been especially interested in Yeats. He hardly mentions his name before 1912. One therefore wonders, why Yeats was particularly chosen along with Stopford Brooke and Bradley to read copies of the early manuscript of *Gitanjali*. Would it be wrong to suppose that Yeats was chosen not primarily because he was even then a remarkable poet and could therefore judge the poetic quality of *Gitanjali*, but because he was enthusiastic about esoteric cults and Indian metaphysics which perhaps was expected in Rabindranath? Yeats certainly was persuaded by the poetry in *Gitanjali* and did not read him merely as a writer of religious verse. Here he found a 'fresh rediscovery of landscape', 'joyous movement', and if not the 'voluptuous body', at least 'the tale of the nuptials of the soul with its ultimate destiny with voluptuous love details'—'Eastern contemplation—carrying that into the very depths of the soul, restoring to us the meaning of tonight's mystery.' The fact, however, remains that most of the readers of *Gitanjali* and other collections of translation expected to find some soul-saving formulas in his poems, and that—we are told—is what should understandably come from a wise man of the East. Readers found deep spiritual significance even in the love-poems translated in *The Gardener*. Thompson remembers "finding the poet, just after the publication of *The Gardener*, more vexed than pleased at an enthusiastic letter from a distinguished English lady writer." "You know," Rabindranath told him, "she insists on seeing mysticism in all I write." (*Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. 1921, p. 46). She was not an exception.

Similar impression was created in America. This is how, here in the heart of Chicago, on one Monday evening, January 15, 1917, Edward Herbert Lewis analysed before the members of the Chicago Literary Club, the distinction of Rabindranath as an Eastern Poet. Pointing out that "Shankara, Plato, Lucretius, Hegel, Bradley, Royce, and Mrs. Eddy" have treated the visible world as less real than the imagined—Mr. Lewis goes on to remind the audience that "Tagore does not belong with these people. He is a great Brahmo, the son of a great Brahmo, the grandson (*sic*) of a great Brahmo. His family revolted alike from monism and from polytheism. They conceived God in the older Hindu way, as present in all nature and yet as Personal." He incidentally reminds the members of the Literary Club

that "Tagore made a great hit with American women, partly because he is unlike the average Swami who appears with the latest revelation to enchant white-gloved audiences. And especially he scored with his flair for childish (*sic*) psychology, and his exquisite love of children."

Herbert Lewis had genuine good intentions, but this kind of emphasis did not help develop the right kind of appreciation of Rabindranath. *New York Times* wrote about *The Hungry Stone & Other Stories*: "A book of strange, beautiful, widely varying tales. Through them all the thread on which the beautiful beads are strung is the poet's mystical philosophy." *Chicago Daily News* gathered 'exotic fragrance' from the poems of *Fruit Gathering*. And in a copyright article in *New York Globe*, December 18, 1913, Frank Crane wrote about *Gitanjali*, *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon* and *Sadhana*: "Rabindranath Tagore is the Hindu poet and preacher to whom the Nobel Prize was recently awarded. . . . There are no preachers nor writers upon spiritual topics, whether in Europe or America, that have the depth of insight, the quickness of religious apperception, combined with the intellectual honesty and scientific clearness of Tagore. . . . He writes, of course, from the standpoint of the Hindu. But, strange to say, his spirit and teaching come nearer to Jesus, as we find Him in the Gospels, than any modern Christian writer I know."

In his own country no one knew or ever suspected that he was a Hindu preacher. But serious results followed from this misconception. Many of his Western readers practically ceased their reading of him with his fine translation of Kabir. This was because, writes Thompson, "they found in that nobly virile poet (Kabir) set forth with a greater sincerity than we can achieve today, many of the similes that seemed to be Rabindranath's stock-in-trade. . . . Rabindranath's drums are literary drums, not actual; the simile is one degree removed from life, and is the worse for the removal. Not so with his lamps and flutes, his dances and lotuses, which still exist. But Kabir and the Vaishnavas were before him with these."

Mr. Buddhadeva Bose has written an excellent introduction to Rabindranath in his short history of modern Bengali literature, called 'An Acre of Green Grass'. Highly rewarding as this essay is, I find it difficult to agree with him when he says that *Gitanjali* "is the quintessence of Rabindranath." But he adds that Rabindranath can-

not be gauged except in the whole. *Gitanjali* is only an important part of that magnificent whole. Sometimes I wonder if these poems are not really the perfection of a stylized form of writing that began quite early with *Bhanushimher Padabali* written while Rabindranath was a boy.

Of the 400 odd poems that he translated himself at least 120 have been selected from three books: *Gitanjali*, *Gitimalya*, and *Gitali*, all published between 1910 and 1914. All other poems, excepting about 35 from *Balaka* 1915 and *Palataka* 1918, were from earlier volumes beginning with *Kadi O Komal* Sharp: and Flat: of 1886. This constitutes the entire collection of poems in translation available to the Western readers. As if Rabindranath was finished with his *Palataka* poems 1918, as if he had not continually developed during the long years between the two wars so that his death in 1941, when he was 80, could be and had been genuinely mourned as an early death. After the publication of *Palataka* he lived almost another quarter of a century, wrote at least another 25 volumes of poetry, 'each distinct from its predecessor, new in form and content', from which one could labor hard indeed to extract mysticism. We who do not read him in translation and are not generally inclined to turn twice to his collected English translations, can hardly conceive that one could judge Rabindranath ignoring completely this last and greatest period of his maturity. His English collected poems are much less representative of his achievement than *The Secret Rose* poems are of Yeats's.

His own contribution to the decline among Western readers of his reputation as a poet can hardly be minimised. He selected many too many poems from his early period, even from his juvenilia. He included songs, originally meant to be sung and not to be read as poems, which of course could not be sung in English, and lacking the haunting melody of the tunes that he composed himself, lacked a great deal. Many of the longer poems appear in a sadly truncated form in translation, some as hurriedly done summaries, a few as odd elaborations. Well, was he not one of the busiest of writers that ever lived? With all his extraordinary command over a foreign tongue could he afford necessary time and attention for the unusual task of translating from his own work? How much time could he really spare? In 1916, during a sea voyage from India to Japan, which could hardly last more than three weeks, he is known to have translat-

ed four of his dramas that form the last part of his collected English work, called *Sacrifice and Other Plays*.

People praise his great mastery of English language. I fail to realize what this has to do with his stature as a poet. These two distinct things, however, have come almost to be equated in his case for the Western readers. Can one be persuasively creative in an alien tongue? Do we expect a St. John Perse or a Quasimodo to be his own English interpreter? And yet Rabindranath had to assume this charge because he was an Indian, and no one else could be expected to do that job for him. There is reason to suppose that a desire to enhance the prestige of his country, sadly neglected then as an underdeveloped British colony, urged him to this odd venture. He became acutely conscious of this anomalous position, and thus wrote to Thompson in 1921: "Occasional gifts of favour (he was referring to the happy transformation of *Gitanjali* poems) do not delude me with false hopes . . . When I began this career of falsifying my own coins I did it in play. Now I am becoming frightened of its enormity and am willing to make a confession of my misdeeds and withdraw into my original vocation as a mere Bengali poet. I hope it is not yet too late to make a reparation!" (*Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 264). To Rothenstein he wrote: "It was not at all necessary for my own reputation that I should find my place in the history of your literature. It was an accident for which you were also responsible and possibly most of all Yeats. But yet sometimes I feel almost ashamed that I, whose undoubted claim has been recognised by my countrymen to a sovereignty in our own world of letters, should not have waited till it was discovered by the outside world in its own true majesty and environment, that I should ever go out of my way to court the attention of others having their own language for their enjoyment and use." (*Since Fifty*, p. 112)

He became aware of the 'cracks and gaps' in his translations and was sorry that he had ever attempted 'to cover them up with some pretty designs that may give them an appearance of wholeness.' This explains the mysterious gaps between the poems in the new collected edition (1937) put out by Macmillan. At least 114 poems printed before are missing. One can only wish the self-critic's red pencil had travelled much further. How could he mangle and bury beyond recognition so many of his fine poems in the sands of a strange language?

Yeats had a profoundly perceptive mind. Had he been acquainted with the variety of Rabindranath's poems that must include more later than earlier works, he could have been spared his disappointment. Rabindranath writes a great deal, but not particularly about God. He, however, affirms life and the joy of being alive. If a message must be extracted from his poetry—all his life he has written about the glory of man who can suffer if suffer he must, and yet can triumphantly declare 'I love', and utterly surrender to the Beautiful. When Einstein asked him if he regarded both Truth and Beauty as objective realities, Rabindranath unhesitatingly answered that Truth perhaps was, but Beauty never. Truth is independent of human existence. But nothing is beautiful until man enters and utters the transforming words—'I love' and 'you are beautiful'. This is the glory of man and he sings of this glory. This noble affirmation of life and the joy of life, in the midst even of disaster perhaps, is not wistful mysticism. Joy is so complete that it affirms Death itself as a legitimate part of the complete harmony.

If one leaves aside the two almost mythical composers or compilers of the two Indian epics—Rabindranath is second to none among our poets and he is the most complete among man India has ever produced. It would be unkind and unfair to imagine that nationalism or local patriotism and lack of perspective urge people who, after a lifetime's study and contemplation of his work, affirm that he is among the immortals on this planet of ours. The fact is that many of these men have intimate first-hand acquaintance with Western literature, whereas Rabindranath's reputation has declined sharply among people who allowed themselves to take only a distant look through a dense cloud of uneven translations, at the unexpected emergence of this Indian poet.

Apparently the Eastern conception of life and literature is incompatible with that of the West. Their essential resemblance, however, lies in the ultimate gaiety as Yeats so memorably expressed in his great poem *Lapis Lazuli*. Hamlet and Lear are as gay as the three 'Chinamen' carved on that piece of exotic stone:

Every discoloration of the stone,  
Every accidental crack or dent,  
Seems a water-course or an avalanche,  
Or lofty slope where it still snows  
Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch

## RABINDRANATH IN THE WEST

Sweetens the little half-way house  
Those Chinamen climb towards, and I  
Delight to imagine them seated there;  
There, on the mountain and the sky,  
On all the tragic thing that stare.  
One asks for mournful melodies;  
Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

It is most unfortunate that Yeats could not discover the same profound gaiety in Rabindranath. But for that Rabindranath should have been, and should still be, translated anew. His work must be encountered not in order to find some short-cut to salvation but to discover joy which is what all significant poets have been creating through the ages.

## RABINDRANATH AND WORLD LITERATURE

PIERRE FALLON, S.J.

RABINDRANATH'S work in the field of education is important; important also was his role as a national leader and as India's ambassador to the world; a religious and social thinker, a great musician and painter, author of many novels, short stories and dramas, a marvellous essayist, Rabindranath was, first and foremost, a poet. Leaving to others the task of studying the many facets of his genius, I would study him only as a poet. But his poetry is so intimately expressive of the dreams and longings and joys of Bengali life that a non-Bengali must always realise that much escapes him, much remains beyond his reach. I will therefore study this poetry only in its relation to other literatures, especially the literatures of the West, and I will attempt to answer one question which has often been asked of me: what is the position of Rabindranath with respect to world literature? Is he only the greatest poet of a particular nation or is he truly one of the great world-poets?

The foreign readers of Tagore, unable to appreciate his writings in their Bengali original, pore over pale translations and, charmed though they often are by the mystic wistfulness of *Gitanjali* or *The Post Office*, generally fail to realise the extraordinary greatness and manifoldness of his lyricism. They think of Tagore as of a sage, a mystic perhaps, and his poetry is but of secondary interest to them.

Some readers, both Bengali and foreign, familiar with the trends of modern poetry in the Western world, find Rabindranath's romanticism little attuned to the doubts, anxieties and tormented moods of the men of today. They prefer, sometimes they judge objectively greater, poets who, desperate and interiorly torn between their longing for Beauty and their realisation of universal ugliness, have rejected romanticism and searched, with the Symbolists or Surrealists, for new poetic techniques and for an art more expressive of their tragic spiritual experiences.

Therefore, to form an objective estimate of Rabindranath's greatness as a world-poet, one must keep in mind the fact that the available translations of his poetical works are generally poor and do



not give an adequate idea of what a Bengali critic justly called "his quantity, his immense range, his fabulous variety." One must also adopt a sufficiently vast perspective. Greatness does not necessarily consist in 'modernity'; besides, 'modernity' is a very subjective and relative notion. The world of Homer and Vyāsa is not the same as the world we live in; Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Racine or Goethe, to be rightly appreciated, must be read in a perspective different from ours. We may find ourselves subjectively more responsive to the poetry of writers closer to us in time; we do not for that reason judge them to be objectively greater. Rabindranath's world, the world of *Golaganachalan* or the world of *Gora* and *Ghare-Baire*, is already a distant world for us; his poems, most of them at least, were written in an age now definitely bygone. Many critics go farther and contend that Rabindranath's poetry is lacking in the tragic depth, spiritual intensity and profound humanity which modern readers expect from a truly great poet, ancient or contemporary; they question the poetic validity of his too serene idealism and the vision of man and the universe. Rabindranath, according to them, does not possess the 'modernity' which is essential to a truly great world-poet, not because he belonged to another historical age, but because he ignored the doubts and despairs of man, because he was too religious or mystical, too Olympian, too positively secure in his peaceful contemplation of Beauty. This identification of 'modernity' and poetic greatness with the "experience of the void" results from a considerably simplified and one-sided understanding of modern literature. As Maritain points out in his lectures on *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* "the spiritual experience of modern poetry is double-faced and self-divided; while determining itself, and this is its greatness, with respect to the Prime Being it has here the countenance of the ardent in refusal, there the countenance of the ardent in acceptance." Many great modern poems have 'quested' for the reality of the Absolute: the religious vision of the mature Eliot, the comic joy of Claudel, and the Faith which inspires many of the present-day poets in the West, are not in any way less 'modern' than the desperate dreams of Nerval, the anguished blasphemies of Baudelaire, or the rejection of all transcendence by Mallarmé or Valéry. If Rabindranath, therefore, fails to be a great world-poet such as modern men can fully appreciate, it is not because of his 'acceptance of the world' and spiritual 'option' but because of some

artistic limitation or deficiency. But does Rabindranath really fail to achieve 'greatness', if his work is examined against the background of great world poetry? I do not think so.

Rabindranath's range is immense. Very few poets have given from and beauty to so many moods and feelings. Tagore's poetry is a vast world indeed: the first astonishment of the child, the carefree and sensuous dreams of adolescence, the deeper passions of manhood, the thirst for the divine, the quiet intoxication caused by Nature's manifold beauty, the other-worldly pensiveness of the sage, the vibrant love of the patriot, the homely enchantments and sufferings of everyday life and the peaceful waiting for death—there are so many and so infinitely varied aspects of Tagore's poetry that all feel at home in it.

Besides this range, Rabindranath's poetry possesses another quality that gives it extraordinary greatness. It is wonderfully musical. Mallarmé dreamed of a poetry that would be pure music, but most modern poets have lost the secret of those ancient poets who were at once musicians and poets. For Tagore, poetry and music were never separated. A modern bard who sang his own compositions, a Bengali troubadour for whom the lute was as important as the pen, Rabindranath was a musician even before he was a poet. I had read many times his *Gitanjali* before I could listen to the music of its songs; listening, I understood much more than I had been able to grasp while merely reading. This may apply to all great poetry, but it applies in a very special sense to the poetry of Tagore. Many poems and lyric dramas of Rabindranath only live when heard in their musical context. This harmony is the soul of Tagore's poetry: the whole universe, Nature, man's life and its diverse moods, Tagore approached as a musician searching for and perceiving harmonies, infinitely varied and subtle. He has created an extraordinary number of rhythms and his poetical work was but a never-ending song, a song that was in turn light and fresh, dreamy, grave and solemn, passionate, mystical and contemplative, but always a song.

A poet whose range was immense and for whom poetry was music, Rabindranath was a great Romantic. Too many foreign readers of Rabindranath think only of him as a mystic and too many contemporary critics are suspicious of all romanticism. But Rabindranath's greatness is the greatness of his romanticism; it is as a romantic poet of extraordinary talent that he must be approached. Longing

for Beauty, deep communion with Nature, wish to escape from the ugliness and drabness of daily life, and the joy and melancholy of love have been magnificently expressed in his poetry. He has created a world of Beauty where the imagination and yearnings of man find the most wonderful release and fulfilment.

But this great Romantic had a deeper and greater *vision* than many other romantic poets. His poetry was deepened and widened by his Upanishadic view of life. He was not a philosopher like Shankara or Bergson, not a mystic comparable to the great 'munis' of the world; but his poetic inspiration was fed on the tradition of the Upanishads and his contemplation went beyond the dazzling spectacle of the finite world. The Upanishadic realisation of suprasensual Plenitude and Joy and Peace and universal Oneness gave his poetry a spiritual profundity rarely found in romantic poetry.

## II

It is difficult, on account of his manifold richness, to find any one poet to whom he can be compared. Tagore has not composed an Iliad or an Aeneid, a Commedia or a Faust; none of his poetic dramas is equal to the great dramas of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Calderon or Racine. Among the great romantic poets of the West, few, if any, come near him. Victor Hugo, the greatest romantic poet of France, is, like Tagore, a word magician who wrote poems of tremendous variety, and a master of rhythm and metaphor who cast into admirable form all the moods of a whole nation; but he is definitely not for France what Tagore is for Bengal. He has moulded the language of French poetry; he possessed luxuriant imagination; but he had the philosophy of a sentimental adolescent. He was lacking in taste and measure, his creativeness consisted only in the discovery of beautiful words and sounds. To 'explain' Tagore in terms of French poetry, one would have to bring in Lamartine with his mellow meditateness, Musset and his vain pursuit of ideal love, Gautier perhaps and his exquisite cult of form, the dreamy musicality of Verlaine, and many more aspects of French lyricism. Would the English Romantics and Victorians give us one great poet to whom we can compare Tagore? Shelley, whose influence is visible in the early works of the young Tagore? Keats, with his more exacting technique and his more objective delineation of Beauty? Words-

worth, who worshipped Nature in his meditative poems? Tennyson, whose 'idylls' and ballads remind us of the 'Kathas' and 'Kahinis' of Rabindranath? Swinburne, supple and senuous like the author of *Chitra*? Tagore has something in common with every one of them; but to give a complete idea of his poetry, one should include all of them together with Spenser and the Irish Symbolists and yet others. There is only one great Western poet whose work has the range and richness of Tagore's poetry—Goethe. In many ways indeed Goethe presents striking resemblance to Rabindranath. He was at home in the classical literatures of the West; he had absorbed the spirit of the Minnesingers and Volksingers of his own land; he rediscovered the best of the old traditions of German poetry and went on experimenting endlessly, inventing new metres and lyric forms. Schiller called him a 'naïve' poet, for every poem of his is the direct outcome of some personal impulse or emotion; but he was also a 'reflective' poet with a deep philosophical bent. He was a great humanist. Without accepting the orthodox religion of his own people, he was animated by profound religiosity. He was in love with the earth, "ein sehr irdischer Mensch" full of that 'Dingfreudigkeit' which was deep joy in the spectacle the world, serene and recollected tranquillity in communion with Nature. Am I wrong if I say that all this applies excellently to Rabindranath too?

### III

There remains one question to treat—that of Rabindranath's actual relation to the Western poets. How much did his poetry owe to influences from abroad and how much did he himself influence the writers of other countries? Rabindranath is the finest representative of the Bengal Renaissance which was occasioned by the cultural and literary contact established between Bengal and the West in the nineteenth century. He belonged to a family which was intimately acquainted with the best art and thought of Europe; he belonged to a religious group which had been deeply influenced by the Western ideal; he knew English and loved English poetry; he spent in England some of the formative time of his adolescence. And yet Rabindranath borrowed little from the European masters. Shelley and Keats he loved; he liked Wordsworth; he was at one time influenced by Robert Browning and, nearly as much, by Elizabeth Browning. But

it is difficult to point out any one particular poet to whom he was indebted to any considerable extent. As Hugo is French, Goethe German, Tagore is Bengali. He assimilated much; he benefited artistically and spiritually by his contact with the world and its writers; but he had no Western preceptor. His romanticism was certainly deepened by his youthful reflections on Dante, Petrarch and Goethe; Shelley and Keats fired his young mind and heart; and I have already spoken of Browning's influence in one period of his poetic career. Much later, he came to know and appreciate the Irish Symbolists; he met, and certainly esteemed, Yeats and Ezra Pound, Robert Bridges and other English poets; he followed with great interest the developments of the new Bengali poetry and was thus brought into contact with the more recent poetry of Europe. But Rabindranath's work was little affected, I believe, by these outside influences or contacts.

What has been his influence on the literature of the world? His influence on all aspects of Bengali literature is of course immense; I have been told that it was important also on several non-Bengali Indian literatures. Outside India, I know only of one great poet whose work has been deeply influenced by Rabindranath—Gabriela Mistral, the South-American poetess. I might add another name—Jimenez, the Spanish poet, though I do not know how far Tagore actually influenced his poetry. I do not think that Rabindranath has so far inspired or influenced any other important writer of the West. Many reasons could be found to explain this regrettable 'absence' of Tagore from the world literary scene, his absence at least as a life-giving force. The West knows Rabindranath primarily as a sage; he travelled in the West chiefly as a teacher and philosopher. His great romantic poetry is little known, and what is known attracts little because Romanticism has long been in the West a thing of the past. I think that the West and the whole literary world could gain much from a better knowledge of his poetry and I hope that on the occasion of this Centenary new efforts will be made to convince the readers of world literature that the Tagorean world is worth exploring, that there is manifold richness there—images and rhythms, treasures of unalloyed joy, and a great and lofty vision, such as our present-day world stands in sore need of.

## ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

**WERNER P. FRIEDERICH** Ph.D. is head of the Department of Comparative Literature in the University of North Carolina, U.S.A., president of the American Comparative Literature Association, and jt. president of the International Comparative Literature Association. Edits *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, and is author of *Outline of Comparative Literature from Dante Alighieri to Eugene O'Neill*. Visited Jadavpur University in 1959 and lectured to the students.

**SUDHINDRANATH DATTA** (1901-1960), poet, essayist and self-styled nihilist, became a teacher of Comparative Literature almost by accident; that he had never thought of being a teacher is proved by the fact that he spurned to take the degree officially necessary for an academic career. But this accident will go down in the history of Bengali literature as almost an inevitable one. When Buddhadeva Bose asked him to join the newly-formed department in 1956, Sudhindranath Datta accepted the offer not in a spirit of obliging a close friend and a fellow poet but with genuine eagerness. He had reached a stage in both his social and poetic life when a renewal of contacts with the new generation of poets and intellectuals had become essential for him. And the Comparative Literature Department of Jadavpur University, under Buddhadeva Bose's Professorship, had become the ideal place for such a cultural liaison.

Sudhindranath was, of course, even more necessary to the department than the department was to him. Till the day of his death (June 25), he was a tremendous source of inspiration to his pupils; the example of his life and the meaning of his words acted like a radiating substance on the minds of those young intellectuals who crowded around him and set up a chain-reaction which, it can be safely predicted, will continue far into the future.

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